**Tis the Damn Season**

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# Tis the Damn Season

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary


Smooth-talking, debonair Baltimore surgeon Hannibal Lecter and blue collar, Louisianan single dad car mechanic Will Graham have *nothing* in common. Except for the forbidden love they shared over one perfect, sultry summer many years ago, and the broken-hearted, bitter anger they both harbor afterwards.

Now Hannibal is forced to return to his uncle's estate near Will's town at Christmas -- I sure hope his car doesn't break down since there's only one mechanic in town...

A cute premise and lots of fluff, but also quite an emotional saga with plentiful angst...and a happy ending, of course.


Notes

**cw: smoking.** Brief references to self-harm.

See the end of the work for more notes

# The long and winding road

**Christmas.**
**Now.**
**Hannibal.**

*"The holidays linger like bad perfume: you can run, but only so far."* -Taylor Swift

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Hannibal exhaled a single, small puff of annoyance along with the thin trail of smoke from the expensive, imported cigarettes he only purchased when particularly *concerned*.

Angel Wood, Louisiana was much hotter, even stickier, in late December than he had planned for, and it irritated him that his natural sensitivity to coming back to this place should be compounded with physical discomfort. He resented the hot sweat gathering on his upper lip, dotting his brow and slipping in slow, thin drops past his shirt collar, doubtless soon attempting to defeat his exorbitantly priced deodorant by making him smell as foul as the idea of this trip --

Yet here he was, "sweating like a dog," as any irritating, small-talking small-town local might lazily note outside the general store on Main Street, and there was the long, winding road that led from Lafayette to its tiny sister town of Angel Wood. His sleek, shining black Bentley flew impatiently, Hannibal's amber gaze alert to any street-crossers who might appear to make his annoyed speed unconscionable, although none appeared.

Restless, he drove on, past the old, faded *"Yo A e Now Ent ring Ang l W od, LA"* sign with its dilapidated red cursive on a dented white background, overlaid as always with a wild twisting growth of the same uncontrollable weed-vine that clung to every tall tree in the nearby woods by the river.

He disliked Christmas enough on the best of occasions, and being here again after so many years felt absolutely…

Hannibal pulled to an abrupt stop when he had finally gone far enough to approach an actual traffic light, a half-interest flutter of red in front of a railroad crossing a few miles out from "town proper," such as it was. He rolled the window down because unaccountably, the previously exquisite air conditioning in his luxury vehicle had sputtered to nothingness between the airport near New Orleans and Angel Wood, as though his own frenetic collection of troubled memories had built up, blood sopping the bandage of twenty years until there was no further defense and he had to *remember,* and no creature comfort would remain to befriend him in such a bitter moment of regret, broken-heartedness…

And so, unequivocally, without planning to confide the sensation to any other human soul, Hannibal was quite concerned.

He did not choose to use the words “stressed,” “anxious,” “worried,” nor their equivalent in any of the five languages he spoke fluently, as such a thought was a sure first step towards weakness (beyond which he secretly feared sudden and inevitable mental breakdown). Pride and nicotine were easier, particularly when driving headfirst into one’s past - or perhaps better put: his personal history’s version of a lion’s den. His finest business suit, blue plaid three piece, maroon paisley tie, gold pocket square, now clung to his frame like an overly attractive wool prison cell, and the cigarette had failed to calm his *concern*, its mild heat only making his own sweating state more profoundly uncomfortable.

Tossing the expended cigarette stub out the window and letting it hit the red, dusty road which he loathed, adored and feared in the strangest ways proved a rare, succinct act of littering on his part that was both unpardonably rude and covertly satisfying, like the small collection of razors in the secret compartment of his bathroom dresser drawer and the way they felt dragging on his thighs when he was alone and the pain highlighted itself magnificently before resolving.

Hannibal committed the small, odd social crime (petty theft, littering, tire flattening of annoying persons vehicles, etc.) occasionally just to remind himself he was still alive and had some power - even the power of rebelling against his own “type A / perfectionist” personality, which came complete with general loathing for all bad manners.

But this did not help either, mainly because he could actually feel moisture of perspiration under his arms and then his suit was so heavy now, the late afternoon seeming liable to plummet its heat right through the roof of the Bentley and consume him whole (preferable, perhaps, to Christmas in Angel Wood, but too unlikely as a prospect to entertain outside of continued, mounting irritation.)

Finally, knowing he hadn’t the slightest intention of facing his uncle, sick or otherwise, looking like a wet rat instead of the illustrious medical professional he truly was after so much hard work, Hannibal pulled the Bentley off to the side of the road near an obnoxiously serene, sparkling stream complete with singing birds and gleaming, intrusively aggressive sunshine and launched himself out, glad for the solitude of relative wilderness as he yanked his tie free with a sharp sigh of relief.

His return, twenty minutes deep at best, had already prompted severe concern. He peeled the blue plaid wool jacket off as well, rolled up the sleeves of his ivory dress shirt and heaved a sigh, too prideful to remove his waistcoat and thoroughly sabotage his elegant family reunion attire.

After slicking a hand through his thick, soft grey-brown hair, finding it nearly matted to his hot brow, Hannibal’s lip curled in a sneer of disapproval towards his every present circumstance, but he steeled himself with the reminder this would be over soon enough. It wasn’t so difficult, surely: pay respects to one’s ailing uncle, do the morally correct thing while preserving one’s future prospects as heir, no need surely to linger in the one horse town nor see anyone else from the past.

He stood, disturbingly tempted to shake a fist at the blistering sun overhead as the low volume radio from the Bentley shifted, after a beat or two of fuzz, from classical to “Merry Christmas Darling” by the Carpenters.

Soon he was glancing in near-desperate temptation at the stretch of russet road leading back to civilized civilization as he pondered the humbling but effective solution of a quick escape.

If he left now, he could be back in Baltimore in a little over three hours. He might even indulge an impromptu dinner at Chez Marie-Louise, his favorite French-Hungarian fusion restaurant. Even without a reservation, the owner (a personal friend and sometimes a bit more) was sure to procure him a table in the exclusive, posh dining room with its exquisite view of the big city skyline -- only the Christmas lights on the buildings to remind him of his severely abdicated family obligations.

Robertus Lecter was not only an outrageously terrible surrogate father, even for a man who prided himself on menacing his relations as a “love language,” but also a contemptible specimen of humanity in general. Almost anyone would objectively agree, if not to Robertus’ noble face. Hannibal could allow his uncle to die without his own awkward presence. He owed the man nothing but contempt. A quiet death at an old age, surrounded by suitably demure relatives was too good for the cruel patriarch. Chiyoh would understand. No one else at Weeping Willow Chateau, the Lecter family seat in Angel Wood, was worth his sensitive consideration on the matter.

He could leave now, go home to a luxurious treat of Chez Marie-Louise’s finest tasting menu, with the perfect accompanying wine for each course. With minimal effort and considerable enjoyment, he might almost certainly end the day in bed with the beautifully curvaceous blonde chef, and spend the holidays in his general style: ignoring them and waiting for them to go away while he spoiled himself with lavish distractions.

These occasional intimacies were never spiritual or romantic, merely physical and barely that. All these years later, he was still prone to seducing pretty people because he could, trying to prove to himself he had moved on. And failing.

There was no point in expecting a deeper connection between the sheets with any new lover. He had given up on it after the first few rebounds. The truth, painful but undeniable, was that Hannibal had only known love once, and with an intensity so strong he never *wanted* to feel it again with anyone else -- if it wouldn’t be Will, if it couldn’t, what was the meaning in it, and how *could* he feel anything at all?

Hannibal squinted into the dusty horizon where the offensive golden orb continued to melt into tall Louisiana Cypress trees tops which never even swayed slightly, as no merciful breeze ever interrupted the sweltering oppression of the afternoon. Hands on hips, he bit his lip, seriously considering his choices.

A very dented station wagon suddenly passed him, speeding and hitting every bump hard, marijuana smoke cascading from the tiny slivers of open windows as horrible country-western Christmas music blared at top volume.

The rickety vehicle sprayed Hannibal with a disgusting new second skin of rust-red dirt, caked on his face and falling from his previously pristine attire in pebbly crumbles. Although he was again alone, he covered his mouth to cough at the dust which he had accidentally swallowed during this attack, then used his pocket square to mop his sweaty brow, too

distracted to realize he had now made his dirty appearance even worse by caking a sort of mud across his forehead.

This unfortunate epidermis had also smeared over his high cheekbones, now rendering him, unbeknownst to himself, the vague appearance of a madman or ruffian. His honey-brown eyes shone out from the dusty mess, as if a statue had just begun to stir into life, everything else still stuck in stone.

He uttered some choice words in Lithuanian which the situation more than merited and returned to the Bentley even more determined to flee this obviously doomed place before any other disasters had time to occur. Perhaps those might be disasters even worse than having his favorite new suit ruined by probably vermin-infested Louisiana backwoods road dirt -- he shuddered to think.

Inheritance and family reputation be damned - Angel Wood was too obviously cursed. The memories from the one summer he had spent here twenty years ago -- the best summer of his life -- its end his only regret…

There were far too many people here who hated him, and not all of them were his relations, who must tolerate him out of practical Lecter etiquette.

He turned the key in the ignition and flinched when the glamorous engine let out a sickly sigh before extinguishing altogether. With a sarcastic bark of a laugh, he tried not to cry and twisted the key several more times, equally in vain.

His head was pounding with *concern,* dehydration and exhaustion both emotional and physical. Sweat and dirt obscured him from the smallest remnant of dignity, and he now had no choice but to walk for Angel Wood proper and the nearest motor shop.

Resigned therefore to accept this repugnant next step as the literal only other option was dying alone of thirst (if he had another choice as to manner of death, he might have decided to remain where he was, but he was a doctor and knew very well that thirst was a terribly excruciating way to go), distinguished and wealthy Baltimore surgeon Dr. Hannibal Lecter began his walk of indignity, lasting two even sweatier miles of dirt, weeds and muscle-aching fatigue. The encounters with insects caused him to share with them a few language lessons as to the finer points of Lithuanian cursing.

Not one vehicle passed him along the way, which was little wonder since anything in town worth doing or seeing was much further up ahead, and few people drove into town this way. It was his sneaking attempt to avoid the main roads and old acquaintances seeing him which had led him here, striding right to their midst while a trail of dust followed in his sulky wake. He now considered requesting any passing motorist to drive him to the airport post haste, as he could always buy another Bentley but his pride was irreplaceable.

He almost wished the station wagon would return to save him, and was blearily weighting the present humiliating predicament against the horror of touching, much less entering such a repulsive vehicle, mainly as a task to keep his mind active, as he felt on the verge of fainting, when finally he entered into what passed as civilization hereabouts.

A gas station which had seen better days was nonetheless occupied at all pumps by cars and the ubiquitous local favorite: pick-up trucks. He passed a line of waiting vehicles on his path toward vehicles on his path towards the “gas n sip” convenience store, where he hoped to borrow a phone and contact Uber, escape still possible before anyone from the past detected him.

To be recognized in such a state was an additional mortification from which he might never recover.

He practically stumbled inside, a quick walk to the front counter delayed by another line, this time of slushie-holding locals eagerly discussing their Christmas weekend plans. Standing behind ten groups of happy townspeople, he glanced through the front window of the store and saw the last miserable dash of sunglow dissolved by a bruise of twilight that would soon be a star scattered evening, clear and only slightly less rude in its heat.

“*Hannibal Lectah*?” a local man’s voice piped up from behind him. Hannibal squeezed his eyes shut, willing the line to move faster, although apparently they were out of sour apple slushies, and a gaggle of preteens at the front of the line were pitching a small-scale revolt.

“What’d ya mean it just ‘ran out’ of sour apple?” a pimple-faced fourtheenish boy in jean cut-off shorts demanded of the checkout clerk who looked nearly as tired as Hannibal - “How does that even *happen*?” asked a girl who must be his sister, the only discernible difference the long pigtails instead of crewcut, even the same shorts (no one here seemed to be able to let their blue jeans live in peace when they could be roughly turned into a fashion crime with a pair of kitchen shears).

The tweens even chewed their gum in unison.

“Try the blue raspberry!” called the chipper-voiced man who had recognized Hannibal.

The outspoken man strolled languorously forward and paused by Hannibal’s elbow and observed him with a smirk before taking a long sip of his nightmare-turquoise colored frozen drink. Hannibal sent up a silent prayer of thanks that it wasn't Will. That would be so much worse. Then the man, an old acquaintance but thankfully *not-Will, not-Will,* whistled under his breath so Hannibal was finally compelled to look at him in return.

“As I live and breathe,” said the man, shaking his head as if observing a fascinating and amusing museum exhibit.

He was several inches shorter than Hannibal, and was the only other person at the Gas’n Sip dressed in semi-formal attire, in that no tatters of inside pockets or shredded fringes hung over his thighs.

Instead, this curious young man (ten years Hannibal’s junior) wore a not altogether appalling grey summer suit, sleeves with professorial patches rolled up to his elbows. He was Louisiana tanned, light blonde hair hanging loose around his ears in hippie style, and a pair of cowboy boots on his feet which essentially ruined his status as least badly dressed in the store.

At present, however, in matters of personal appearance, Hannibal was in no position to judge.

Nor was he in a position to hide, unfortunately.

“It *is* you,” the fellow drawled in that heat-fogged slow accent that belonged to this place like victimized denim and brain freeze inducing sugar rot in a cup.

Everything in Angel Wood moved a little slower, relaxed, therefore annoying. Including speech.

“Hello again, Grady,” he said crisply, bare essential decorum done with as he cast the former acquaintance an implicit “leave me alone” look.

He hoped this would mark the end of an inconvenient if irrelevant reunion, but luck continued to be a teasingly neglectful mistress.

“Charlie, look who it is!” Grady beckoned, and his companion, a statuesque and stunning black woman of his same age, stepped forward to examine the odd visitor to the small, sleepy town.

She held an extra large grape slurpee with a dripping glide of condensation on the side of the cup that made Hannibal freshly aware how sandpaper dry his throat was. He should purchase a large bottle of water from the nearby refrigerator cause - perhaps whatever packaged snack fare was least horrific - even the slow-turning hot dogs in the rotisserie display caused his stomach to rumble in starved craving at the savory-salty aroma.

Charlie, another former acquaintance from the one summer twenty years back, looked Hannibal up and down, then clucked her pierced tongue in mocking disapproval.

“Mmm,” she answered, warm brown eyes going wide under thickly mascaraed lashes. “Hmm.”

“Hannibal freaking Lecter, the prodigal son of Angel Wood, returns to our lives at Christmas of all times, and he’s *wearing* most of Ol’ River Road,” Grady said, as Hannibal sighed and finally moved a step closer to the front of the line.

He patted himself down, only to recall that he left his wallet in the pocket of his suit jacket back in the Bentley. How absolutely maddening! And unlike him to be forgetful. Damn this town. A few miles into Angel Wood, his entire front brain functionality appeared to have decreased by at least half.

If he could not purchase refreshment, he could surely request assistance.

“And all you got to say is ‘mmhmm?’” Grady went on, staring at Charlie in surprise.

“*Yup,*” Charlie answered, and took another long sip of her drink, brows raised as she returned to their place in line behind him. “Mmm-mmm-mmm-mmm-mmm,” she added in a clear tsk-tsk-tsk tone, shaking her head, and then in a low sing-song, “*I wouldn’t have come back if I were you.*”

“There is certainly no need to be glib, Charlie,” Hannibal glowered without turning around.

“Well, what’re you doin’ back here?” Grady pressed, “Got somethin’ to do with your uncle’s illness, I reckon, such a shame about that.”

Hannibal gave a short, snobby nod, as it was easier not to contribute verbally. Grady had assumed the truth easily enough.

“Sorry, man, that sucks. Well, I bet your uncle’ll be glad you could be with him for the holidays.”

Robertus would, in fact, not be glad. But Hannibal nodded, no need to be dragged into an unnecessarily prolonged encounter merely because Grady’s guesses were becoming less astute.

“So have you seen Will yet?” Grady asked innocently, or with an excellent disguise of innocent curiosity.

The mere name sent a shiver down his spine and made his skin hotter, if such a thing could even be possible, and apparently it was. His heart jumped as if there was an electric jolt that hit it along with the sound of one syllable, *Will,* while his mind swooned and wept in equal measure, having to repress so many sultry-sweet and heartbreaking memories all at once as the usual montage began to play across his mind against his every attempt to shut the recollections out forever.

Charlie laughed. “'Course he hasn’t, he’s still in one piece. His nose ain’t even broke.”

“I beg your pardon,” Hannibal huffed, but thank goodness, he had now earned the right to approach the clerk at the front counter. He had no other recourse but to rely on the potential kindness of this sixty-ish, plump lady with a greying pixie cut and a *Garth Brooks: The Dance Tour* t-shirt.

“Please, madame, may I have the use of your phone to dial for Uber?” Hannibal inquired, ignoring the clerk’s rather inhospitable wince at his appearance. “My car broke down on my way into Angel Wood,” he elaborated, and her expression softened into sympathetic.

"We ain't got *Uber* in Angel Wood, mister," whistled another customer behind him, a middle-aged fellow holding a six pack of cheap beer in one hand and an extra large bag of pork rinds in the other. "Just Tommy's taxi service if he's not drunk yet tonight. But there again, you can't call him on account of--"

“Yeah, more's the pity," chimed in the lady at the register, "I’m sorry, mister, but there’s no cell reception out here, been gone for days. Local network shorted out somehow and we ain’t been able to get anyone out here to fix it so close to Christmas.”

She shook her head. “My landline's kaput too, got so used to my cell that I stopped payin' the bill. I can hook you up with a bottled water and a complimentary pack of slim jims, but there ain’t much else I can do. Say, why not walk on over to the repair shop across the way and get your car towed and fixed? Bet you could be on your way again before Santa comes.”

Hannibal sighed, drummed his fingers on the counter. “Santa” would be expected in less than a week's time, and he had to admit it was both more logical and ethical that he should stay in Angel Wood instead of abandoning his car along with his obligation to pay Robertus last respects.

“Hannibal, before you go over to the fix-it shop, you oughta know--” Grady began, but Charlie slapped his shoulder and shhed him before bursting into giggles.

Tired of their shenanigans, Hannibal accepted his meager snack and slipped out of the Gas ‘n Sip. He stood by the door and drank the bottle of water so quickly he nearly fainted, then looked across the street to affirm the woman’s indication that there was a car repair shop nearby.

Indeed, a small brick building boasted a sign in red cursive announcing “Angel Wood Fix-it - Walk-ins welcome.” Perfect, he did not even need an appointment.

Hannibal walked across the street, newly aware that no one around him had their phone out but were relying on real human conversation alone. He had not seen this amount of cut-off denim in one place since the summer of 1993, and some of the townspeople even wore vest versions that made him suspect the devil’s influence on their fashion sense.

In such clothing he could not be tempted to leave the house. Why, whatever inspired these men with their less than Baltimore-chic figures to go strutting about flashing their legs like --

Ah, there was the entrance to the garage, and a pair of work boots sticking out from underneath one damaged pick-up that had clearly been in a recent accident, dented all over and with a bashed-in headlight.

The mechanic was only visible by means of his tan workboots, loosely laced, and shapely, bare legs covered in light brown hair. Hannibal heard a wrench being ably twisted under the carriage of the car as he approached closer. Over the speakers, yet more regrettable country music played, this time a song about line-dancing elves.

“Pardon me, sir,” Hannibal began, “I am in quite a predicament with my car, and have been informed by the locals that you may be able to assist--”

The man rolled out from under the car, his fit and firm body having stretched over a mechanic’s creeper on wheels. He wore a tight white t-shirt, clinging to his supple frame with a light sheen of work sweat, and a pair of denim cut-off shorts that ended above the knee and emphasized his flawless physique. Black, tar-like motor oil was smeared on the sleeve of his shirt, the hard curve of one sweat-shining, distracting bicep, and his forehead under a mess of moist brown curls, the softest curls Hannibal had ever seen, then or now. His eyes were piercing, especially when he was highly infuriated, as he was the moment his beautiful sapphire glare slammed into Hannibal like a train, hurting much more, the eyes Hannibal still dreamed about every night and woke up missing.

For a few suspended moments of pure shock, the two men stared at each other: the mechanic, with his ripped jeans and pale cheeks turned pink with a flush that might be work exertion, surprise, anger, many other feelings -- and Hannibal, endlessly embarrassed by his own

appearance, covered in dirt and carrying a jumbo bottle of Aquafina in one hand, a half-eaten Slim Jim in the other. But he was no longer afraid of this moment; on the contrary, exhilaration coursed through him like a drug, like an accelerant for a fire he thought he had put out so many years ago.

In those few moments, face to face with the mechanic, wondering how it could even be possible for someone to look *more* gorgeous with the passage of twenty years, Hannibal remembered how much he could feel.

How he could feel love and passion to such a heady, unbelievably intense degree that the whole rest of his perception faded away and all he could see was this boy, just as quick to anger as he remembered, just as wild a thing, pretty, sweet and sensuous, brilliant, full of unpredictable danger.

His heart galloped and his eyes filled with tears as he smiled, and he knew he was staring and smiling like the greatest idiot the world had ever known -- after what had passed between them, for him to open himself up to more heartbreak was more than absurd; it was emotional suicide - but there was, as it turned out, nothing else he could possibly do.

Hannibal's dry lips parted to say how he regretted missing every single second of this man's company and what a fool he was to ever leave, how he had dreamed, obsessed and longed for this reunion while fearing and avoiding it, also foolish, he saw that now, what a waste. This was all that mattered. He could explain, surely--

"Will." That was all that came out. Gruffly, and in a panic of joy. His heart, Hannibal could feel that pounding again, as if he had been in a numb coma all this time.

The boy crossed his arms, biceps flexing, forearms decorated in oil as well, and Hannibal breathed in the never-forgotten scent of his piney aftershave. In the days of their early acquaintance, Will hadn't much needed aftershave, but Hannibal saw that now he did need it, for he had a beard, which only made his extraordinary handsomeness more striking. Immediately, he imagined the beard scratching and rubbing his own face, his shoulder, his thighs -- and blushed deeper, gulping for air.

Will's brow knitted and he scowled, a twitch in his jaw broadcasting anxiety as his eyes told of mingled anguish and resentment, hot and cold blue all at once, tangling Hannibal up inside his own emotions as easily as ever.

His voice, when he finally replied, was gravelly and sharp, with an ache underneath that made Hannibal's stomach fill with butterflies.

"Will, I---"

"What the hell do *you* want?" Will snapped.

# Ain't Gonna Beg You to Fall

Chapter Notes

Yes, Will has a full-on Southern drawl in this one. 🔥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Now.**
**Will.**

"*One day you'll see I was worth it all.*" -Kate Voegele
"*Don't concern yourself with this mess you left for me / I can clean it up, you see, just as long as you're gone*" -The Wreckers

***

Will couldn't believe it, he couldn't even *believe* it!

This was going right on the top five list of the worst things that had ever happened to him, and *the whole list* was comprised of this idiot standing above him with his infuriatingly perfect cheekbones caked in disgusting river mud, holding a fucking Slim Jim like a lifeline.

It took a minute to metabolize the mere sight of him, during which time, Will reached down and tugged his shirt, making sure his tattoo from the weekend he turned eighteen was properly covered. Hannibal didn't need to know Will never had the damn thing removed. Luckily, the location of the cursive initials on his hip made them easy to hide.

His own wandering fingers knew just how to find the tattoo under his lonely sheets at night, remembering Hannibal's mouth, his kisses building in heat and intensity until his teeth sank in, Hannibal's large and knowing hand wrapping around Will's aching--

He squeezed his eyes shut, despising the fact that he still had those memories and those nights he gave into them, to this very day. Why did Hannibal have to show up in person after all this time and make it even worse?

"Look," he reasoned, exhausted, "I don't know what crazy Christmas 'reflect -on-my-past-fuck-ups' bullshit made you think it'd be a great idea to show up here but my answer's no thanks. Not interested in reminiscing over eggnog and cookies or whatever you had in mind. There ain't *nothin'* here for you."

"I didn't come back to Angel Wood for you," Hannibal answered stupidly, still staring at Will with those puppy dog eyes.

*For fuck's sake…*

“That is,” the older man amended awkwardly, “Not initially. I came back because I’ve been summoned to the Chateau. You’ve heard of my uncle’s illness.”

“Got ears,” Will snapped. “I bet you’re really going through it, what with your dear uncle being on death’s door.”

“That was unkind,” Hannibal complained, “But no, as you guessed so astutely, I am not going through it whatsoever. Still, I felt it my duty to pay my respects alongside the rest of the family.”

His voice, whether petulant, snobby, obnoxious, or all of the above, was sexy as ever, the silky accent automatically making everything about Will throb. Time had weathered that voice in the best way, slightly deepening it and adding an appealing layer of grit.

He didn’t mention that just hearing Hannibal speak again, so close to him, so far, reminded him of the hot nights down by the river when his lover would come up behind him, loop a confident arm around his slender belly, murmur naughty words in his ear and lick it, graze it with his teeth. He didn’t want to think about how dizzy he got just barely remembering it, never mind vividly recalling as he easily could -- all he had to do was let down his defenses and invite the memories in, which thankfully happened rarely by this point. But it did happen.

Instead of bringing all that up, he answered in that same tone, friendly as a snapping turtle poked with a stick,

“Wouldn’t wanna miss the chance to lock down your illustrious inheritance.”

Hannibal shrugged, causing a small mist of dust to cascade around him in a cloud that looked like fucking Pig Pen out of the Peanuts comics. Will refused to laugh or find him cute.

“I don’t care about my uncle’s money,” his ex-lover replied. “I don’t need it.”

Will’s eyes narrowed and he perched his hands on his hips, getting even angrier. “How *convenient*, not to need your family’s blood money. Wish I had the luxury of turnin’ down a legacy like that.”

“It may be difficult for you to understand my perspective on the matter, but--”

“I gave up tryin’ to understand you years ago, Hannibal. We’re from two different worlds and there ain’t no changing that. I also stopped wanting to change it. So spit it out, if you didn’t come here for *me,* which -- congratulations on not being *that* dumb…”

“Try not to sound so disappointed,” Hannibal answered with a smirk.

*There he is.* All this polite stuff was starting to grind Will’s gears. He wanted to *fight*, get out his aggression, and he’d finally pushed all of his ex’s buttons enough to achieve the desired result.

“Try not to be such an asshole. Oh, I forgot.” Will returned his smirk with an even meaner one of his own. “You can’t help it. It comes with the Hannibal Lecter built-in starter kit, along with the ego, the pride, the selfishness and the goddamn lies.”

“I never once lied to you, Will.”

“Right. Sure.” He huffed a coarse laugh, looking down at the ground, eyes stinging but he wouldn’t cry if it was the last thing--

Will wanted to grab his face and kiss him and get those hands sloppy and rough all over his whole body, dirt be damned, and he wanted to die, and he wanted to scream.

He wanted to grab the wrench he’d just put down and hit Hannibal in the head till he shut up. He wanted a great big eraser to take away this hurt and wanting, the memories and the confusion, the *inundation* of everything Hannibal brought to him, smothering, swallowing, drowning him, and he didn’t want *anything*. Not anymore.

“My car broke down on Old River Road,” Hannibal announced, glaring, which was annoying and didn’t affect Will otherwise in the least.

He tossed the slim jim in the trash and matched Will’s posture, hands on his hips, not knowing that Will’s own hand absent-mindedly caressed the tattoo under his jeans, a habit which had long since become subconscious. Of course, while trying to show his own growing frustration and probably intimidate his ex, Hannibal only looked more ridiculous due to his Pig Pen aesthetic.

Will flashed his teeth in another cynical smile. “All the way out there? Now, that’s a damn shame.”

He stalked to the fridge, wiping sweat from his brow and lip with the outside curve of his wrist, and popped open a cold one.

“So?”

“You would test the endurance of a saint,” Hannibal said irritably.

Will drank his beer, which helped with how sweaty he was, but didn’t ease his tension otherwise, merely presenting the added challenge of not choking because he hadn’t accepted or understood fully *Hannibal was really here, right here, he was back.* Will was so nervous, it was absolutely unacceptable.

His lack of a reply to the accusation made Hannibal more surly.

“I require your assistance,” he said through his teeth, “*Clearly.* While I cannot pay you now, I will happily do so when we get to my car, so long as it hasn’t been robbed during my absence.”

“*Your* car?” Will put the useless beer bottle down on the table where he kept his tools and leaned on it for a second of moral support.

He could have sworn he caught Hannibal checking out his ass. Well, that didn’t matter, and Will didn’t care.

Let him see what he was missing out on.

Why should Hannibal care that Will worked hard and had a reasonably good body? Why would Hannibal think about that when he had (probably) that fancy, perfect little wife in Maryland, or if he was single again by now, Will just bet there was a long line of hot, single, perfect people on his level -- rich, professional, pretentious -- just waiting around hoping that handsome Dr. Lecter might scope out *their* asses.

Will wasn't on Hannibal's dance card anymore, and he'd lived through enough of that burning jealousy to accept this with gratitude. It was no fun being in love with the guy that everyone wanted.

Then he started closing up the shop for the night, angrily efficient, everything back in its right place for when he returned in the morning after what was now guaranteed to be a fitful sleep. "You drove here from Baltimore?"

"I drove down to give myself time to change my mind, turn around and go back home. A feeling of uncertainty has plagued the plan for this trip since I first conceived it. However, in the end, I turned around again each time and ended up here all the same. I see you know where I live."

Hannibal said it with such triumph, as if he had achieved some massive victory and uncovered all the ways Will kept tabs on him, as if Will had nothing else to do but pine away for a despicable bastard like him. *Please.*

"People talk here. Surely you remember that. You're generally known to be a successful surgeon living a swanky, shiny, perfect life in Baltimore. I avoid listening to any further detail as it's really of no interest to me."

"I had forgotten how charming your little tirades are," Hannibal said, wistfulness in his eyes and annoyance in his tone.

"Oh, well, then, let me remind you," Will retorted, wishing he didn't feel the old chemistry flaring when they argued. Must be his imagination or some malfunction of his own twisted nostalgia.

He locked the door and flung his hand out in a sarcastically hospitable invitation for Hannibal to exit before he did. "Terrible exes first, isn't that the popular courtesy?"

"I've only heard of 'ladies first', but thank you all the same. Although, perhaps *you* should go first, if the rule is 'terrible exes first'."

Hannibal had the nerve to smile, something dark and familiar glittering in his eyes. In that moment, he almost overcame the whole "head to toe dirt" thing and looked like his former, flawless self.

Thank God, Will was sure that underneath Hannibal's muddy veneer, he must have acquired some awful wrinkles and lost his good looks with time. There was no way he still looked as good as he used to.

After studiously avoiding the doctor's socials and any articles about him, stopping Chiyoh whenever she tried to gently broach the subject of her surrogate brother with his ex-lover (her attempts waned as the years accumulated) Will remained hopeful he could finish the job of shoving Hannibal all the way out of his heart. Disillusionment would be just the ticket. He needed to see for himself that the real Hannibal was a big disappointment and no one who was worth obsessing over anymore.

Will pushed the door open and let it slam behind him, potentially, but Hannibal caught it easily, then closed it and followed Will pretty adroitly for someone who looked like he'd been through hell and back in the last few hours.

"You are the only mechanic in town. Will -- please, don't reduce me to outright begging."

"You ain't gotta beg, of course I'll fix your car." Will walked to a shiny blue pick-up truck, immaculate and better-looking than any other truck in town.

He prided himself on taking great care of his own vehicle, but then of course, it was good for business to remind everyone he was the guy who fixed and remodeled cars and trucks. Being the only mechanic in a town this small wasn't as profitable as it might seem in theory; he was poor as fuck and constantly trying to find new ways to drum up business.

Hopping into the truck, he grabbed a towel from the duffle he kept in the backseat, useful for his many impulsive swims, and put a couple clean, dry towels over the passenger seat before opening the door and leaving it like that, assuming Hannibal would figure out what to do.

The doctor got into Will's truck, sitting on the towels, giving the younger man an inquisitive look.

"Don't touch anything. You're not getting my baby all dirty on top of ruining my night."

Will started the truck, backing out as Hannibal looked at his profile, analyzing him like in the old days, seeing through him like glass; obnoxious, unasked for, intrusive. Arousing. A prickle of sweat and wanting at the back of his neck, the base of his spine, told Will he still liked the feeling of Hannibal's eyes on him. Well, screw that.

Stupid body. Stupid high sex drive and touch-starved disaster zone sensitivity. He could ignore it all, *easily.* Any minute now, he'd be able to ignore it all.

He turned the radio on, loud. While he hated Christmas and its accompanying songs, he barely heard them anymore. The music he played at the garage was just to break up the silence that was too fucking creepy when you spent so much of your time alone and occasionally talking to the cars.

And this was a welcome opportunity to torture his ex a little more.

"Could you turn that down, please?" Hannibal shouted over the cheerful sound of Kenny and Dolly singing "I Believe in Santa Claus."

"*I believe there's always hope when all is lost!*" Will sang on the top of his lungs, making it even worse.

He drove through main street, waving to some acquaintances and flipping off his best friends Charlie and Grady when they stood in the Gas 'n Sip parking lot with their jumbo slushies staring as Will drove by with The Ex in his passenger seat.

If Charlie and Grady fucking saw Hannibal first and didn't even warn Will -- oh, he was going to ask them later and there'd be hell to pay. And by hell, probably a food fight before they drank all night while Will complained about having to see Hannibal again and his friends consoled him. He smiled, knowing he was lucky to have such good people in his life, and shouted the next bit louder, "*And I believe in Santa Claus!*"

"Sing it baby," said a high school cheerleader in her uniform, winking at Will as he drove by her and her friends.

They lingered outside the little boutique that was one of the only fairly decent places a girl could buy cool clothes in Angel Wood. Plenty of those girls flirted with Will, but he paid them no mind. Silly school girl crushes, he knew all about it and ignored it for the nonsense it was.

Meanwhile, Hannibal looked terrified by the prospect of listening to this hideous noise all the way to Old River Road. "Please, Will! It has been a taxing day!" Hannibal couldn't even be heard unless he yelled, which he never did, and that was fun to make him do.

Will laughed an evil laugh, ready to drive the knife in deeper with whatever the next lame Christmas song might be. But as the upbeat tune transitioned into the next song, his arrogant smile faded.

Gentle guitar strumming began, then the sound of a familiar, wistfully melancholy memory -- "*I'm so glad you made time to see me / how's life, tell me how's your family / I haven't seen them in a* --"

*Oh, hell, no.* Will reached over and shut the radio off with a bump of his fist against the button that almost broke it.

"Back to December." What a joke. Stupid how he always got so sad over those sappy lyrics. He and Hannibal never even had a December together. Until now, he guessed, one night of bitter insults and a quick escape, maybe a few more painful but fast encounters to finish fixing the car and get his money. They'd never had a Christmas together and they never would.

"So," Hannibal said with a sigh of relief.

There was nothing to listen to or distract from the loudness of their presence in such a small space together, except the low whoosh of the air conditioner and the occasional beep of a passing car, saying hi to Will.

"You became a mechanic," Hannibal added thoughtfully.

He had wasted no time taking advantage of the quieter environment to make inane small talk.

"*Yup.*" Will sped up slightly; he didn't need a ticket or to endanger his precious truck, but one thing he did need was to get out of having to talk to Hannibal, before he lost his temper and went off on a tirade on the past or started to cry.

"I remember your interest in the mechanical engineering program at the local junior college. Did you go--"

Will flashed his headlights to let another car make a turn in front of him at an intersection. While waiting, he glared hotly at Hannibal, who apparently wasn't going to shut his big, pretty mouth despite knowing Will hated him.

"*YUP.*"

"Are you married?" Hannibal went on. Despite Will's loud tone and yet more sarcasm, he remained gently persistent, clearly curious.

"You see a ring?" Will held up his left hand, wriggled the bare fingers, then started driving again when the light turned green.

They passed from main street into what was fondly called "the sticks" or "the ass-back of beyond" by many Angel Wood folk. The smoothly paved road turned into a bumpy, red-dirt path, leading to yet more foolish memories and hopefully Hannibal's car as soon as possible.

"Before you plod on with the next part of your interrogation, *yes,* I was married once, years ago. I tried it out. Wasn't for me. How about you? I can't really see your hand through the muck."

"No ring," Hannibal laughed softly.

"Awww." Will went on driving slowly. "Tell me when we're close to your car." He put the high beams on since the street lights out there were placed way too far apart. "So sad to hear it didn't work out between you and Alyssa."

"Alana." Hannibal was smiling when Will looked at him, and he almost crashed the truck into the next tree they passed.

"What the hell are you smiling at?" Will grumbled, gripping the steering wheel hard, watching the road even more carefully. Talking to Hannibal was a hazard.

"Forgive me, Will. You almost seemed just a little jealous there, for a moment. When you mentioned and intentionally misnamed Alana Bloom."

"You're delusional. Is that how you are these days, or did you inhale too much dust from this road earlier?"

"It didn't work out between Alana and I either. I gave it a try. It wasn't for me."

“Cute.” Will saw a black Bentley pulled off to the side of the road by a clearing with a small pond and lots of wild flowers. “Real fucking cute.”

“Children?” Hannibal inquired, examining his nails casually, although they were filthy and there was no point.

“Yeah. I got a boy and a girl, twins. They're fourteen.”

“Biological?”

Will shook his head. “They’re fosters. I hope to adopt them one day, if they’ll have me.”

“You always had a kind heart.” Hannibal’s smile now seemed to be all glowy and dewy-eyed, and it lit Will’s fuse in the worst way.

“Don’t compliment me, okay? I don’t need it. I don’t want to hear it. It makes me feel *unkind*.”

He parked his truck behind the obnoxious Bentley and got out in a scramble of angry limbs, frustrated by his childish rage and how no one else on earth got him mad like this.

“Dead battery,” he announced after examining the car while Hannibal watched with quiet interest. “Coolant leak. You gotta flush the coolant to replenish it when it’s this hot, especially after such a long drive. Overheated, killed the battery, not a tough couple things to fix. I can have it done by this time tomorrow.”

“Perfect, thank you so much, Will.”

“Why the hell do you think I’m helping you, anyway?”

The headlights of his truck lit them in yellow glow amidst the nonstop background noise from the birds and frogs. They stood face to face again, Hannibal a few inches taller and much broader, Will remembering with another twist of the knife in his own heart -- how well they fit together.

He wondered how they would feel together now, but he didn’t want the thought and it made him feel uneasy, a traitor to himself. Many of his problems came from thinking since thinking quickly led to his intense, empathetic fantasies where everything felt and tasted much too real.

“To get me out of your hair, as it were. And in the hope I’ll spend the remainder of the holidays at the Chateau before making a subtle departure back to Baltimore. Then you hope that you will never have to see me again.”

“Yeah, that’s it exactly. Tell me, Dr. Lecter.” Will looked at him defiantly. “How does it make you feel?”

“It breaks my heart.” Hannibal shook his head, looked down at his feet in his once-glossy and perfect shoes now rendered a mess.

“Perfect. Then we’re finally even.”

Will ripped his gaze from Hannibal’s dejected figure, knowing he’d be just fine in a few minutes, pride restored.

By the time he was done hooking his tow to the Bentley, Hannibal was back in the truck, staring in the opposite direction out the window. And he didn’t say anything on the way to the garage, until Will asked, “Where are you going now? Can I give you a ride to the Chateau?”

“I don’t want any more favors from you, Will. I will make my own way now.”

“They say the phones are gonna be down till after Christmas. How am I gonna let you know when the car’s done?”

Hannibal sat down on the public bench between Will’s fix-it shop and the donut place next door. “I’ll come back this time tomorrow. Would you like me to pay in advance?”

“No, tomorrow night is fine. See you then.” Will took a few steps towards his truck before stopping short and turning around. He clutched his keys so hard they cut gently into his skin. “Hannibal. I know I was real mean out there by the river earlier. I...um…”

“Yes, I know it, too. That will suffice. I don’t care to hear any forced apologies in an attempt to assuage your own guilt.”

“Ouch. Fair enough. G’night, then.”

“Will.”

“Cut it out,” Will begged, “God. This is bad, even us just seeing each other, talking, I can’t dredge up the past. I’ve come too far.”

“I understand.” Hannibal gave up his next question that easily.

“Fine. You always find some way to win no matter what I do. I’ll be uncomfortably wondering what you were gonna say unless you tell me. So: what?”

“I was under the impression we were already even in the heartbreak department. Yet you clearly believe differently. There’s every chance your belief on the matter could be based on a misunderstanding. I wanted to let you know that if you ever change your mind and want to talk about it, I am ready.”

“I can’t, Hannibal.” Will rolled his eyes to hold off the threat of impending tears. “It’s too much for me to go back there. I know I should be fine to deal with what happened. It’s been long enough--”

“Since that summer? Or the party?”

Will didn’t have to ask which summer or which party. They still spoke their own language, only now, instead of pet names, dirty talk and inside jokes, it was made up of fragments of

what used to be.

*Their* summer together had been in 1993, the best three months of his life. And it hadn't actually been twenty years since they saw one another. A chance encounter at a terrible party in 2005 had been the one other occasion.

That night at the party, already a long time after That Summer, he was thirty, and Hannibal was forty, and that was the worst night of Will's whole life.

"Both," he answered truthfully. "Just leave it be, okay? It ain't worth the trouble it'll cause to get into it any deeper. I was wrong to bite your head off for something that happened so long ago. Doesn't mean I forgive you, but I'm just tired enough to forget."

"I wish I knew what I did, exactly, to upset the balance of grievances between us and find myself so squarely in the wrong. What exactly should I be atoning for? You must know that as soon as I saw you tonight, I fell in love with you all over again. I've seldom felt quite so helpless."

*Why are you doing this? Why now?* Sincere as Hannibal seemed, Will didn't know what he believed, or what he *wanted* to believe on the matter. He was shook up and pretty damn helpless himself.

"But everything is different," he fretted, "it's been too long, and if you don't know what you did between That Summer and The Party, then you still don't know why I was so mad that night and it never mattered. You don't have the self-awareness to know when you've been cruel."

"Will," he tried again, "I really think it is worth--"

"Less. Worthless. I said, goodnight."

***

A few minutes later on his drive home, Will knew Hannibal was probably still sitting there on that bench, would probably be there while he went into his small but comfortable house and showered, then watched tv for no other reason than to have an excuse to be sitting there waiting for the twins to come home by curfew. Such a casual, cool dad (*not.*). They would poke fun at him for being such a goody two shoes *again,* and he was looking forward to it.

When he parked his truck in the little gravel driveway, he sighed and pressed his forehead to the wheel. He moaned in frustration. "Why am I like this?"

He walked over to Grady's place, which was only three homes away from his own little green house with its quaint front porch that added "traditional character" as Chenille, his real estate agent, had assured him. He took pride in his neat, pretty house and his truck, earned by years of hard work and learning how to run a household and a business -- finally, over the last year, learning to be a father, something he'd always wanted to do. He was a good father.

Some days, he really thought the twins were going to drive him around the bend with their laziness about schoolwork and sneaky misbehavior (or at least they thought they were being sneaky). But he'd heard tell that the way to know if you were a good parent was to ask if you were feeling a little crazy, clueless and overwhelmed. That meant you were doing your job. So he could rest assured he was giving it his all, and even on the worst days, hope it led to them being a happy family in the long run.

But finances sucked. He tried not to dwell on it, making fast progress towards Grady's old, hippie chic lavender Victorian and clanging the heavy knocker three times. He had to make the mortgage payment this month, or Chenille would be back with a sad face to put the house right back on the market only two years after he bought it with such high hopes. Depressing.

And of course, if he couldn't pay his bills, he would be in danger of losing the twins back to the system. Even more depressing.

*Merry Christmas, Will.*

Grady answered the door with a bowl of Frosted Flakes in his hand and soon, a huge grin like he hit the jackpot. "Out with it, what all happened between you and the ex? Don't hold back on me, now."

"No time for that now, I need you to do me a favor. Glad to see Charlie's not over." He glanced at the inside of Grady's house over his friend's shoulder, looking paranoid and sneaky like the twins on a bad day. For what he had planned, it would be best to keep his other best friend and self-appointed president of the "Defend Will Graham" club out of it.

"Oh, I'll be sure to tell her you said that."

"Don't you dare, unless you want me tellin' on you for spoiling your dinner with cereal again."

"You're a cruel bastard. My lips are sealed and don't you *dare.* Speaking of which, it's just me, Pauline and the kids home. Charlie has a big date with the girlfriend."

Will nodded, distracted. Grady leaned on the doorframe and ate a bite of Frosted Flakes. "Wanna sit out on the porch?" he asked when he swallowed.

"Grady, what's going on?" Pauline called from the kitchen over the noise of pots and pans.

Will could smell fried chicken and sweet potatoes and his stomach rumbled, taking a break from somersaulting over Hannibal to demand dinner.

"Nothin'!" Grady replied.

"*What?*" she yelled.

"*Nothin!*" he answered his wife with a shrug.

A pause from the kitchen. "What?"

“Don’t have time to visit either,” Will went on. “Just need you to go to my shop -- well, the bench outside it -- and pick up Hannibal, then let him stay with y'all tonight.”

“What’s he doing at the goddamn bench outside your shop?” Grady laughed so hard he almost spit out a few Frosted Flakes.

“My best guess is pouting, feeling sorry for himself, that kind of thing,” Will shrugged, scratching his jaw and yawning. “I sure as hell ain't lettin' him stay with me, but we can’t just leave him out there on his own. He's all...gross and dirty with no one fawning over him, it's like his worst nightmare. Too embarrassed to go to his uncle’s Chateau, too precious about accommodations to stay at Cherry’s.”

He shivered, naming the one motel in walking distance from Hannibal’s location, a shambles of a place frequented only by drunken adulterers and the occasional naive outsider on their way to one of the bigger towns or cities that surrounded Angel Wood.

“He tends to stay in one place for a while, *thinkin'*, when he gets in this mood,” Will added.

“I mean, okay, sure. You must have been awful hard on him if you’re offerin’ him charity by proxy.” Grady stuck his cereal bowl on the side table near the door and grabbed his car keys.

“Don’t let him know it’s charity, or that I told you to go over there. Just act like you drove through and happened to see him.”

“You talk about him like you still know him so well,” Grady pondered, “But it’s been so long…”

“Ha. I spent a couple hours with him earlier, Grady.” Will sighed so hard the curls clustered over his forehead bounced. “Trust me, Hannibal Lecter ain’t changed one bit.”

Chapter End Notes

**Updates, chapter count, etc.** Okay, so I finished outlining. The story may get a bit shorter or longer but this (18) is what I am planning for now.

I expect to get on a regular posting schedule over the holiday break! This week, (today is 12/13) I'll be updating whenever I get a chance.

**Next time,** We're going back to where it all started. Get ready for '90's!Hannigram and a whole lot of earnest young lovesick angst. What exactly happened That Summer?

# Dreams

Chapter Notes

cw: mentions of general and religious homophobia, smoking (cigarettes, pot)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Will. Then.**

June, 1993

"*Dreamlover, come rescue me"* -Mariah Carey

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"I don't think I'm straight." Will mused. He tried out the joint, pulled a sour face, then passed it to Grady. "Are we strictly sure this is actual weed, by the way?"

"I dunno," Grady replied. "Charlie?" He took a puff from the joint and coughed.

"I do want Fritos," Charlie sighed. "But it's anyone's guess."

"We would be the only ones in town that can't get high easy," Will groaned. "Why do I even bother? I'm the Hamlet of Angel Wood I swear to fucking God."

"Not straight would track with that." Charlie sat up.

They had been lying on the wood floor of Will's foster family's old attic, smoking a possible joint right next to the open window. It was June 15 and the summer was officially here. They'd marked it not by the end of the school year, still a week away, but by the arrival of Chiyoh, a stunning and mysterious girl who Charlie had been in love with for at least ten years. Charlie was eighteen now and that meant she had romantic *stamina*.

The Lecters were a unique entity in the otherwise mellow and often backwards town, a dash of elegant grace upon their landscape that always felt a bit *Dynasty,* a lot weird. Will often said they were more like the Addams family right before Charlie threw a pillow at his head.

Chiyoh was the surrogate daughter in the Lecter clan, nestled between commoner and family member in the gayest possible manner, not to mention her silky raven hair that seemed to go on for ethereal miles and her coy smiles. Charlie couldn't bear the ten months of the year she had to live without quiet and stolen, mostly imagined smiles shared with Chiyoh, and Will didn't really get it, lusting and loving someone who never really gave you the time of day.

He'd never feel or act like that, obviously. What a waste of time!

The Lecters didn't move in the same world as mere Angel Wood High seniors, so Charlie's ambition was incredible. Chiyoh spent her falls, winters and springs at some fancy boarding school in Switzerland that Will couldn't even pronounce the name of. When she got back, it was for a full immersion in decadent Lecter summering; Charlie snuck onto the Weeping Willow Chateau grounds last July and got a few polaroids of what went on there behind the lofty gates.

It seemed to involve a great deal of the Lecters sunbathing by their enormous pool while servants brought them Rich People Food like caviar, fois gras, anything taken from a part of an animal you didn't really wanna know about, cocktails for Robertus Lecter and his wife Lady Murasaki; mocktails for Chiyoh, who usually looked bored.

They went to a lot of extravagant parties up in Lafayette and New Orleans, and Chiyoh was a star on the debutante scene, since no one looked better in those white gowns with the puffed sleeves that made most girls resemble oversized first graders at the father-daughter dance. Will had to admit that Chiyoh was gorgeous, but with her cool and decisive quietness, she wasn't really his type.

"How d'you know, really, though?" Grady tried again with the joint and coughed. "I think Beaufort was putting us on."

"If my parents named me Beaufort, I'd be an asshole selling fake joints at exorbitant prices, too." Will sighed. He pulled his knees up to his chest and watched the tire swing swaying from a tree branch in the yard next door; the kid who lived there had just hopped off it after a hearty swinging session and jumped the fence to play with his friend next door. The windows in this attic felt magical, so high up and wide, Will could always see what was going on for what seemed like miles.

"C'mon, Graham, spill it, you always seem to know about romantic stuff, sex stuff."

Will giggled tragically. "Hilarious since I'm such a virgin I practically have to wear a white V on my chest, but true. I just do a lot of research and too much thinking."

"'Research'. Scrambled soft core pay per view, more like. So, how *do* you know you're not straight?" Grady asked, opening up a bag of chips and sampling one before passing the bag to Charlie.

It was a hot day because it always was, and as lifelong residents the three of them didn't ever complain about the sticky, heavy air they breathed. Their neon-colored t-shirts and cut-off shorts were glued to their skin with light sweat, but the attic was the only place they could get away with smoking pot.

"Weeellll," Will began. When the bag of chips got to him, he raised his eyebrows in curiosity. *Cool Ranch Doritos.* A new flavor. Hmm. "You know in Indiana Jones, when Harrison Ford's shirt gets all dirty and ripped towards the end of the movie – any of them?"

"That's a solid point," Grady admitted. "He's a sexy guy."

“You sound gay, too, bud,” Charlie laughed. “But then so do I: I don’t care about Indy; I want Marian in that silky lil’ white dress number.”

“Well, I like Indy *and* Marian,” Grady put in, brow furrowed in confusion. He ran a hand through his shaggy, dark blonde hair. “What does that mean? Thought you were either straight *or* gay.”

He shrugged and ate his Doritos. Grady wasn’t bothered which side of the sexuality spectrum he landed on and Will envied his laid-back attitude. He’d never been as calm as Grady or as strong and sassy as Charlie, just awkward, shy and way too thoughtful, too internal, *too sensitive*. So he’d been informed by the series of foster parents who had been his main source of potential affirmation and encouragement from his toddler-hood to the present, at least.

“Dolly-Rae Wyatt said in her health class presentation that people can be something called ‘bisexual,” Will elaborated. “Where you, like…you could go either way, or wanna have a threesome, even, with a guy and a girl. Then Ms. Hathaway made her shut up and said she was taking five points off the project for talkin' about indecency in front of the class.”

“Guys are gross, no offense,” Charlie shuddered. “Although I’m only goin’ on basic conjecture there and the fact women are so goddamn beautiful and sexy. Ain’t never kissed a boy, in fact.”

“Me neither,” said Will and Grady in unison.

“I’ve never even kissed a *girl,*” Will laughed, fishing a gummy worm out of a large plastic bag of them on the floor, finding the half-green, half-yellow ones he liked the best. “I liked Indy and I liked the blonde girl from Temple of Doom. In that one, I didn’t know which one of them I wanted more, but I wanted them.”

“You’re so horny, Graham,” Charlie laughed, bumping shoulders with him as her long, dark hair in lots of thin braids bounced around her prettily.

“I’m a teenaged boy, Charlie, and please. I’ve seen your bedroom. That’s more posters of Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* than I knew existed.”

“What a woman,” Charlie sighed.

“I thought the blonde in Temple of Doom was too high maintenance,” Grady observed. He twisted the cap off a small bottle of Crystal Pepsi and took a long, cold sip.

“I liked that, though.” Will smiled and rested his chin on his warm knee. “She was *classy*.”

“Well, why don’t we find out for sure what we are, seein’ as nobody in our families ever talks about gay stuff and we’re technically all goin’ to hell if we *are* gay. If I’m goin’ to hell, I wanna find out what kinda fun I should be havin’ on the way.” Charlie wiped the Dorito dust off on her shorts and grabbed her backpack, pulling a small tin container of Ouch! Bubble Gum out of the front pocket.

“Here.” She handed the boys each a stick of the bright pink gum and they looked at her in bafflement.

“Why are you givin’ us this gum that everyone knows damn well loses its flavor in about ten seconds?” Will blinked down at his gum in a little bandaid wrapper, as usual stiff although still in the packaging, since this brand was always stale for no reason, too.

She rolled her eyes and started chewing her own piece of gum. “Cuz you only *need* it for ten seconds, to get rid of the Dorito and gummy worm combination breath. I’m gonna kiss each of you idiots to see how I feel about kissin’ a boy, and then you two have to kiss. See how you feel about it. I already know how I feel about kissin’ a girl, since I got into the literal closet with Crystal Palmer. Talk about seven minutes in heaven, damn.”

Will felt a weird spike of excitement and heat in his stomach that had nothing to do with the June heat wave. He was finally going to get a kiss on the lips!

“Sure, why the hell not.” Grady chewed his gum for ten seconds, stuffed it in a napkin and leaned over to Charlie, cupping her cheek and sweeping a few braids back from her face.

“You’re smooth, Larson,” Charlie remarked, impressed.

“Yeah, I was just born that way,” Grady drawled. He sat cross legged across from Charlie on the floor and leaned towards her easily, not worried in the least. On the boombox behind them, a Sting song ended and a Janet Jackson one started.

Will liked the lyrics in this one because they were sexy and intriguing. “*If I was your woman the things I’d do to you / I’d make you call out my name, I’d ask who it belongs to”* He honestly had no idea what Janet was talking about, but *Poetic Justice* was a good movie and –

Grady’s lips connected with Charlie’s for a few chaste pecks, then he brushed his mouth against hers a little more deliberately.

“Huh.” Charlie frowned. “Not bad, but not exciting. C’mere, Graham.” She tugged the collar of Will’s t-shirt and he moved closer, barely getting out a request for her to wait a second before her mouth was on his.

“It was alright,” Grady said with another shrug. He grabbed the Doritos back and picked up an issue of *Rolling Stone* to flip through.

Charlie was warm and her breath tasted like fake pink from the bubblegum. She had full lips and a thin layer of mauve lipstick still coated them, which added a slicker texture. Will liked the feeling of having another mouth on his own, but beyond that the kiss didn’t seem to arouse any sensation, and this disappointed him. He knew he wasn’t attracted to his best friend, who was more of a sister to him than anything, but still, given his raging hormones he expected more of a reaction.

“Boring,” Charlie threw her hands up. “As I suspected.”

Grady laughed. “I give you a lotta credit for tryin’ though. At least you cleared that up. Okay, Will, let’s give it a go. Come on, I promise I don’t bite.”

He had kind green eyes and he was a little shorter than Will and they had been best friends with each other and Charlie since first grade. Will blushed furiously because something about kissing a boy felt more scandalous.

It was just because Reverend Harper at their little Methodist church in town was always going on in his sermons about how gay people would burn in hell for defying God’s Natural Order of Things (these sermons had been the actual first way Will even found out that gay existed, so he bore the reverend a certain odd gratitude).

There wasn’t anything different, surely, since kissing a person was kissing a person and why should a boy kissing a boy carry some sinful and extra sensuous implication?

These were a lot of thoughts about boys and kissing, and the next thing Will knew, Grady brushed his unruly brunette curls back from his forehead just like he had caressed Charlie before kissing her. “What? That’s what Zack Morris does when he kisses Kelly,” Grady murmured proudly when Will gave him a questioning look.

He kissed licked his slightly chapped lips and then pressed them to Will’s, humming in interest at the warm contact.

Grady tasted the same as Charlie because he hadn’t eaten more chips yet, and his mouth was a little rougher, his approach to kissing Will firmer and more interested than hers had been. It was a little better, Will thought when they pulled back, but he had no desire to continue or to make out with Grady.

“I didn’t hate that,” Grady smirked, ruffling Will’s curls. “But I think we’re better as friends.”

“Same,” Will agreed. “I think it was too hard to tell how I felt about kissin’ either of y’all because we’ve been friends too long. There ain’t…chemistry, ya know? I wanna feel something like…y’all see *Indecent Proposal*?”

“I fell asleep,” Charlie said, bored at the mention of the movie. She had a Sassy magazine in her lap and was examining a pull-out poster of the *90210* cast.

“My Dad rented it but he didn’t like it so he didn’t copy it with the second VCR. I was gonna get it when I go back tomorrow, unless someone else swipes it first. It’s always out,” Grady sighed. “I wanna see Demi, dammit. Now, she is foxy.”

“Right. Very. So there is this one scene where Demi is…she’s poor in the movie, and she goes to like…a fancy resort, I don’t remember why,” Will reflected. “And she goes into this high end boutique and tries on an evening gown she could never afford. She’s admirin’ herself in the full-length mirror and she feels someone watchin’ her. And she looks behind her, and Robert Redford is *smoldering* at her like he’s gonna undress her with his eyes and take her right there on the floor of the boutique. That is what I wanna feel, like how Demi felt there. I thought it was dumb she went back to the whiny husband after –”

“Stop it, don’t spoil the damn ending,” Grady complained, swatting his arm. “Hey, I think Earl’s back, ain’t that his truck?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Will nodded, following Grady’s gaze out the window to the driveway below where his foster dad’s dented pickup had just turned in and parked crookedly.

The day-drinking, insult-lobbing “father figure” in his life was another disappointment to Will, who had given up on having real parents years ago. He also didn’t want to cross paths with Earl any more often than necessary; he’d be coming of age in a month and then he could legally move out on his own. For now, Will and his friends climbed down the ladder on the side of the small, grey house that had most likely originally been blue. And they ran, stealthy like James Bond, before they could be spotted, crossing the lawn and clearing the Sawyer family’s white picket just like the ten year old neighbor had a little while ago.

***

On the last day of Senior year, Will rode his bike and linked it up to the rack along with those of his fellow bike-commuting schoolmates who would soon be distant memories if he had anything to do with it.

He wasn’t sure how he was going to get out of this one horse town, but he had to find a way. There was a junior college in Baton Rouge and that seemed far enough away for a fresh start. They had a mechanics associates program that only took two years, and then he could open up his own–

“Hey, *freak,*” said the resident meathead bully, Glenn Rowan. He tossed a wadded up sheet of notebook paper at Will’s head as they almost bumped into each other in the hallway.

“I just wanna go to my locker, Glenn, gimme a break,” Will sighed.

The football player had been on his goddamn case for the last four years, always around for a cackling insult, a lunch theft or on several occasions locking Will in the men’s room with the lights out.

“Where’re you goin’ after graduation, freak?” Glenn backed Will up against the lockers as the curly-haired senior rolled his eyes.

“Never did get an explanation from you on why I’m supposedly a freak,” Will observed wryly. “What’s it gonna be, want my lunch? Ain’t very good, I made it myself, just pb and j and Gushers. Or are you here to give me a wedgie? You’re so predictable it’s honestly boring.”

Truth was, Will had been bullied since kindergarten and he was pretty sure it was only because bullies could smell the insecurity on shy kids from a mile away. He was easy prey, despite his fiery temper that led to a lot of conflict and meetings with Principal Meyer where he and the bullies would have to hear how they’d never go to college at this rate. No one ever believed that Will was on the victim side of the situation and that was what he preferred because nobody wanted to be known as the wimpy little coward who narced on cool, popular kids to the damn principal.

“You’re such a loser,” Glenn claimed, slamming his hand hard into the locker right next to Will’s head. He got Will to flinch with the loud noise and unavoidable fear that he was the one about to get hit. It was his laugher and his next comment, “You’re goin’ nowhere in life, loser, this is the best you’ll ever have,” that set Will off.

He saw red and then his fist burst out, punching Glenn in the stomach. He’d hit the bulky guy so hard that his hand was killing him and he was still in shock with combined regret and adrenaline while Glenn keeled over and clutched his stomach, howling in pain.

“Will Graham,” said Vice Principal Preston, a blonde guy who despite being relatively young for a school administrator didn’t relate to or bond with the students whatsoever, preferring to be a taskmaster and general pain in the ass rule-enforcer. “What a disappointment, but not a surprise.”

Will shrugged with a sarcastic sigh. “I’m sorry I can’t be more entertaining.”

“And I bet that’s all you’re sorry about, huh?” Preston scowled accusingly as Glenn wept, soon comforted by some of his teammates and a gaggle of cheerleaders.

Charlie and Grady had just arrived, returning from a before-school driving class to find their best friend in hot water again. They stood there and winced because there wasn’t anything they could do to help.

“Pretty much. I guess I have an anger problem like you always said.” Will felt a bit smug, not quite recognizing himself; it seemed to be the harsh, unexpectedly delightful thrill of punching Glenn that had done it. “But there’s no more detention and I’m honor roll, so you can’t stop me from graduating. Guess there ain’t much you can to do punish me this time.”

“And that’s where you’re wrong, son. I’ve got just the thing to help you with your problem. There’s an Anger Management workshop starts tonight at the Methodist’s. Comes with a nice community service requirement as follow-up. Maybe that’ll teach you life’s about more than punchin’ through every petty annoyance.”

“Anger Management?” Will groaned. “Aw, *c’mon.*”

***

Will had never been to church when it wasn’t a Sunday morning. His former foster mom Gracie used to take him before she moved to Tennessee with her nine cats. She wasn’t so bad, really, and he kept the habit as a sort of homage to one of the more safe and content periods of his childhood.

At night the church was eerily hushed, cloaked in shadows with just an overhead light that clicked on when he ran up the front steps to guide his way. His sandal flew off with the speed of his hasty ascent and landed on the grass.

“Dammit all,” Will muttered, half-hopping across the lawn in front of the old brick church. A small army of mosquitos, awakened by his feet, immediately attempted to bite him into

oblivion. “Aw, fuck you, get off me now,” he complained more loudly, swatting all around him like a madman.

“I think this must be yours,” said a deep, husky voice he’d never heard before.

Will looked up from his latest attempt to ward off his minuscule attackers and fell heart-first into a pair of devastating, mysterious brown eyes, very dark in the moonlight and dim yellow glow of the church light. The stranger had high cheekbones and plush lips currently curled in a teasing smile, and he was tall, with dark hair that fell in silky waves over his forehead, long legs in khaki shorts, firm muscles shown off by a short-sleeved polo shirt.

And he was holding Will’s sandal. “Cinderella, isn’t this yours?”

Apparently, Will’s complete silence, wherein he stared at the handsome stranger and further reeled in maddening, upsetting infatuation at the sound of his exotic, smooth accent, had confused the newcomer. Being called ‘Cinderella’ only deepened Will’s blush.

“Who are you?” Will blurted idiotically.

“Thank you,” the young man smiled. “For being the first person I have met since arriving in Angel Wood who has not said *‘I know exactly who you are, you look just like your uncle.*’”

He was older than a teenager or college student and younger than a parent; around young teacher age, Will guessed. And he ignored Will’s stupid, staring silence, seeming somehow delighted. Crouching down, he held up the sandal and murmured, “May I?”

Will panicked. The faded tie-die t-shirt and jean shorts which had seemed fine to wear until this moment were suddenly not. Oh, that he had picked out something a *little* cuter.

He seemed to choke out, “Okay, yeah,” and that was some work considering his heart had got stuck in his throat. Plus his palms were so sweaty he expected them to drip all over the handsome, princely stranger, which would be even more embarrassing.

The young man gently lifted Will’s bare foot by the ankle and slid his sandal back on, along the way briefly, barely applying his big, strong fingers in a caress from Will’s ankle bone down to the arch of his foot.

He smiled up into Will’s wide blue eyes as if this was all the most normal thing in the world and he did this every day, hook line and sinker stealing a guy’s innocent and unprepared heart by acting like Prince Charming.

“There,” he murmured intently, gazing more thoughtfully at Will’s amazed and highly confused face. “That’s better.”

The loss of his warm touch hurt, even though it was hot out and Will shouldn’t want someone stronger (therefore heavier) than him pawing him up when it was uncomfortably sticky and the air so dense with humidity; still, he wished the stranger would grab him close and lay one on him – like…in *An Officer and a Gentleman,* the first fantasy that came conveniently to mind, the stranger would kiss him with passionate abandon, sweep him off his feet and carry

him away from all his problems, hopefully to the first bed in the vicinity. Although he had very little understanding of what two guys actually *did* in a bed, well, he wanted it.

As "Love Lifts us Up Where We Belong" began playing in his mind to supplement the fantasy and Will pictured a canopy bed covered in rose petals and the man slowly undressing him like a long-awaited present, he roused to reality again only because the stranger had put his hand out.

Will shook it, blathering, "I'm sorry, my hand's sweaty, it's hot as balls out here tonight."

"That it is," the man laughed, a sound somehow so wickedly *innocent* and unaffected. "You're a breath of fresh air, though. And who might you be?"

"Will G-Graham," he stammered when the stranger winked at him, eyes sparkling, and lightly squeezed his hand.

"Are you here for the anger management or to pray?" Will asked, pleased that despite the awkward question, he hadn't responded more inappropriately to the man letting his hand go.

It would be socially unacceptable to respond as he really longed to, and on top of that, dry humping in public would likely land him in another type of management class. He didn't want to hang out with the local sex addicts, even if he might be one himself – the virgin sex addict, the drooling little outcast imp lusting after a sophisticated older guy who looked like he just walked off a yacht.

The stranger chuckled. "The Anger Management. I don't pray."

"Y'all come inside now," chirped up an impatient voice, belonging to a burly bald man with a clipboard. "Meeting's about to start. Behave and we'll have coffee and donuts at the end."

"Oooh," Will rolled his eyes, long dark lashes fluttering as he waved his hands in sarcastic excitement, smirking over his shoulder at the stranger who followed him languidly towards the door of the church where the workshop leader awaited.

His inexpert flirting made the stranger's lazy smile flash into a dazzling grin, so that Will saw he had shining white teeth, sharp and slightly crooked, *beautiful*, and his whole face lit up when he smiled, as if the whole universe was suddenly distilled to just the two of them.

"Your parents let you drink coffee, kid?" The bald man inquired, pointing the clipboard at Will.

"I don't have parents," Will retorted, annoyed. "And I do what I want."

"You rebel," the teacher replied, unimpressed. "Go get yourself a seat in the multipurpose room downstairs, son. I've been warned about your attitude and rage issues, and believe you me, I'm prepared to learn you better common sense and decent behavior. My nephew's your Vice Principal, you know. I'm Charlton Preston." He puffed out his chest in a terrible plaid shirt with short sleeves, sweat stains at his pits, not exactly making Will shake in his sandals at the prospect of the upcoming meeting.

“Ugh, there’s *more* of you Prestons?” Will groaned, glancing at the handsome stranger expecting a hint of moral support.

Instead, he saw the young man’s grin fade as dawning knowledge made him look… disappointed.

“Vice Principal? I thought you looked about college age,” the stranger said to Will, unmistakably glum.

“Will…Graham,” Charlton Preston mumbled, checking off his name on the attendance. “Says here you’re seventeen. Big for your britches, huh? And you, sir, I do not have to ask who you are – you look so much like your uncle!”

The stranger groaned. “So I’ve been told.”

“Hannibal Lecter,” Charlton read off the attendance roster. He checked off the stranger, *Hannibal*’s name off with special flourish. “Heard tell you evaded arrest earlier today by the skin of your teeth and the clout of your family name. Just don’t go expectin’ special treatment here and we’ll get along fine.”

“It’s not exactly my top concern,” Hannibal replied, not bothering to even make eye contact with the teacher before shouldering past him with an effortless brooding sexiness that had Will staring at his new crush and trying not to drool.

Hannibal’s back was even beautiful, broad and strong, a boater’s body actually. Will wanted to ask him about it when he could, because he loved boats, too. He recognized some of the same muscle definition he’d managed to gain in his own arms, legs and torso from multiple summers of rowing, sailing and swimming, but he was still, no matter what he tried, disappointingly skinny. Meanwhile, Hannibal was unmistakably powerful in build while his snobby attitude and automatic assumption that others would fall at his feet (which Will thought almost anyone probably would) had their own sort of naughty charisma.

He was…like Indiana Jones and the blonde girl from Temple of Doom rolled into one person, and Will was *gone.*

He clip-clopped in his sandals after Hannibal in his fancy loafers and they made their way to a small meeting room containing a circle of those depressing metal folding chairs you find in such places. A motley crew of fellow Angry People sat sulking, most with arms crossed and scowling, otherwise a complete variety of ages from early twenties to Mr. Jennings from the general store who had to be pushing eighty. Will guessed those middle schoolers must have been stealing the penny candy again and got him threatening to "box their ears," whatever that even meant.

Will was the youngest one there. He sat down on the uncomfortably hard and flat chair and gave Hannibal a pained look of ‘isn’t it so annoying that we’re both at this stupid meeting and we’re like the coolest ones here who understand each other and how lame this is.’

Hannibal just looked oddly concerned. “I’m sorry, Will,” he murmured attentively, even looking a bit guilty. “I was flirting with you a little outside. I didn’t know you were only

seventeen but I should have asked right away."

"I don't mind," Will said, his brow furrowing. "I'm graduating real soon. Not like I'm a *minor* minor. I'm grown."

Hannibal couldn't seem to resist the enchanted way he looked at Will and smiled warmly. "I'm sure you are. Still, I'm ten years older than you and in enough trouble already, after one day in Angel Wood. I don't want to corrupt you or drag you into my trouble."

He patted Will's knee with a more chaste touch and folded his hands neatly in his lap, determined to behave at the meeting and extricate himself from whatever *trouble* landed him in the undesirable place.

Will ought to do the same, as Older Equally Annoying Preston had started blabbing about self control and he had to complete this workshop successfully to avoid being held back from graduating with his class. V.P. Preston couldn't prevent Will from collecting his degree by August, but he could make him go to summer school in an extended form of detention that would eat up what should be some of the funnest, most adventurous months of Will's life, his new manhood.

The lecture on controlling your feelings and your body dragged on, and Will had been to D.A.R.E. meetings that were less boring. Instead of sensibly paying mind to O.E.A. Preston, Will was still staring at Hannibal's aristocratic profile and thinking in some strange fit of passion, he'd like to softly *bite* that cheek.

*Please corrupt me. Please drag me into your trouble and never let me out again.* His pleading thoughts did nothing to get Hannibal's attention back, and even sitting right next to each other they seemed worlds apart, like Will's age had built a wall between them.

His next order of business had to be to demolish the wall. His birthday at the end of July ought to be enough, but what until then? Surely Hannibal would flirt with him again once he turned eighteen and it was legal and all. Right?

What if Hannibal -- beautiful, forward, very flirty Hannibal -- met someone else before then, someone better, closer to his age, actually cool? Fuck. This was. This sucked! It wasn't fair. What was Will going to do?

Suddenly Charlie's hopeless love for Chiyoh did not seem pathetic at all, less when Will recalled that Chiyoh was basically Hannibal's sister. The family obviously had some kind of magic, an irresistible quality, a mystique you couldn't help finding addictive once you got close up.

"Y'all gotta learn to *trust* people 'stead of shootin' em down with aggression and violence." O.E.A. Preston stood up and gestured for the students to follow suit. "Time for some exercises. First, do some trust falls. Your partner is gonna catch you, then you catch them. Learn that not everyone's out to get you and you can depend on your co-workers, your friends, your customers, to be good citizens. If they ain't, you go down to the station and report 'em, you don't take the law in your own hands.

Four trust falls, then we'll do some meditation and breathing exercises," the teacher continued. "Y'all can have a fifteen then, and we'll finish the meeting with some dramatic exercises."

Will was so elated that he would get to fall into Hannibal's arms, he jumped up from his seat. But Hannibal had turned to the classmate on his other side, a stay at home mom who told the class she'd been arrested for lunging and clawing at a working mom that said she was pathetic and setting the women's movement back twenty years. She looked pretty fucking excited too, to get to have this young, striking man catch her in his big, strong arms *that ought to be around Will.*

As for Will, he caught old man Jennings carefully a few times, and they feigned Jennings catching him when the teacher passed. "It's okay, I know your back goes out sometimes," Will whispered.

"Thanks, Will," Jennings whispered back, patting his shoulder gratefully. "I'll save you some Now 'n Laters for the next meeting."

On the fifteen minute break, Will went to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face and confirm his determination in the mirror. He had to get Hannibal to talk to him again, at least. He wanted Hannibal's attention, to be his focus, God he wanted it.

He found Hannibal outside smoking a cigarette and leaning against a tree looking like a Lithuanian James Dean.

"Hey," he greeted, and Hannibal looked up at him with hesitation before he nodded.

"Will. So, what did you do to end up in the illustrious ranks of the Angry?"

"I punched a bully in the stomach. You?"

Hannibal took a drag from his cigarette and let the smoke out through his nostrils. "I was out on a date with a pretty girl this afternoon, having coffee and minding our own business, when a prize ribbon pig of a man came up to us and announced she was *his girlfriend.* Instead of having it out with me, as a real man would, he tried attacking her. Took her by the shoulders and yanked her up from her chair."

He shrugged, glancing over at Will, who tugged his ear and bit his lip.

"So I thrashed him until he passed out. Then the girl accused me of almost killing the love of her life and told me that this is just 'their thing,' and how dare I, etcetera."

"Their *thing*? What, that she goes out with other guys, then he hunts her down and manhandles her? That's fucked up."

"People enjoy all manner of fucked up proclivities, of course," Hannibal said, making Will dizzy with the sound of him swearing in that silky accent, plus the unnecessarily sexy way he looked smoking, which had as well a wrongness to it that made it even more so. Will had never in his life wanted to be a cigarette until now, watching Hannibal's lips tighten around it

and how he licked his upper lip between drags. “But I would have appreciated a warning. As it is, my Uncle Robertus had to come into town – which he never does – and talk the sheriff down from jailing me. Hence, Anger Management and community service.”

“Hence,” Will nodded. “So, the famous uncle.”

“It’s not much fun constantly being told you resemble your least favorite person, and even less fun having him ‘save’ you from being tossed in a jail cell in bloody Mayberry,” Hannibal groused. His shoulder was thrust so tightly against the tree, Will thought it must hurt.

“How in the hell were you on a date, anyway? Didn’t you just arrive in town *today*?”

“Yes,” Hannibal nodded. “I met her at the airport and found out she was from here, offered her a ride to Angel Wood in my uncle’s car, then I asked her to coffee.”

“Just like that, huh?” Will laughed. “Jesus. I ain’t never asked someone out in my life because I find the mere prospect *terrifying.* End up spending most Friday nights raiding the video store and chomping popcorn with my also-queer but platonic best friends, wondering when I’m gonna grow enough backbone to *live* my life instead of just dreamin’ it.”

“Dreams can be lovely, Will.” Hannibal stubbed his cigarette out against the tree and dropped it in the nearby trash can. He put his hands in his pockets and gave Will a discerning look. “Sometimes far superior to reality. Don’t try to grow up too fast. Enjoy being seventeen.”

*I’m gonna scream. I’m literally gonna scream. I’m gonna slap him.*

“Gee, thanks for the advice. Sorry I just opened up to you like that, for you to give me some condescending answer like I’m an annoying kid wasting your precious time.” Will blushed and spoke in the harsh, gritty way he did when most upset. Tears threatened, so he turned quickly and tried to bolt back inside.

Hannibal caught up and grabbed his arm, turning Will back to face him with deft authority. “Don’t do that.” His stern expression faded when Will went slack in his grip, immediately submissive. Then Hannibal dropped his hand with a regretful sigh. “I only just met you tonight but it’s clear to me you could never be annoying. I didn’t mean to be condescending. Perhaps I envy you, with so few responsibilities and your whole life ahead of you.”

“Please, Grandpa. You’re twenty-seven. Folks here talk about you, say you’re a doctor.”

“I’m going to be, starting this fall,” Hannibal nodded. His maroon polo shirt looked amazing with his russet eyes and he was altogether too attractive. Plus, a goddamn doctor. Convenient, since Will felt a fever coming on. “I don’t have parents, either, you see.”

“Sorry.”

Hannibal shrugged again, which seemed to be his general opinion on life. “My uncle made me come back here, basically blackmailed me to achieve it. I have to live at the Chateau until fall, when I begin my new post at a hospital in Baltimore. I had expected a better setting for the summer after five grueling years of med school, and instead I’m trapped *here*...”

“Talkin’ to me?” Will smiled, mischievous.

“Talking to you is the best thing that’s happened to me since I arrived.” Hannibal smiled back, looking dazzled, which Will knew must be his imagination. He was nothing to be dazzled by, just a shy orphan from the wrong side of the tracks with skinny legs and messy hair. And Hannibal was…*Hannibal.* He was a god.

“End of break!” O.E.A. Preston called into one of those foghorn megaphone things. Coach had one of those he used at practices and games while Will, tucked away to avoid going home, drank stolen mini-bottles of whiskey under the bleachers and reread J.D. Salinger books.

“Hear that?” Hannibal joked, since anyone for twenty miles must have heard the obnoxious racket of the summoning. He looked Will up and down with apparently irresistible scrutiny, contemplating mysteries as seemed to be his nature. “Break’s over.”

“Can we be friends?” Will dared to blurt before they went back in.

“I think so,” Hannibal replied, cautious. “With the right boundaries. I don’t want to give you the wrong idea. It was reckless of me to be so forward before.”

“I didn’t mind,” Will grinned, blushing again. “Not a bit.”

“You’re…” Hannibal walked a few paces away and gave his own hair a tug, then turned back to Will. “Come on, friend, let’s run through a few anger-provoking scenarios and see if we can’t navigate them without losing our tempers.”

“That’s the spirit, son,” O.E.A. Preston congratulated him as the two young men went into the church while he held the door open for them.

Following Hannibal downstairs, Will couldn’t help thinking that the only thing making him angrier than he’d ever been in his life right then was the goddamn calendar that made him, on the summer Hannibal Lecter finally came to Angel Wood, *seventeen*.

Chapter End Notes

**Next time:** We're going back to the future, where we left present-day Hannibal in a very uncomfortable situation.

# The houseguest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Hannibal. Now.**

“He’s way too big for your bed, Wy,” a small, girlish voice whispered, giggling.

“He’s too big for all three’a our beds pushed together,” a rather more cynical but only slightly more mature male voice responded.

“Did Mama even say what he’s doin’ here?” - this from a third voice, prim and crisp for such a young one.

“Naw, she just said some dumb grown-up stuff like he’s an old acquaintance of dad’s who needed a room for the night.” The boy again.

Hannibal remained flat on his back and half asleep, his body slung across the twin-sized bed in a feat of defiance against gravity. He preferred to ignore the small intruders to his much-deserved morning slumber, and so feigned total unawareness to their presence in the hope they would soon disperse.

“Never thought I’d see a dude this old who wears a silky sleep mask to bed, never mind showin’ up outta nowhere at practically-strangers’ house, like…Mama sayin’ ‘acquaintance?’” The boy, clearly the considered voice of authority among the trio by virtue of age, continued suspiciously: “That’s cold. Not even an old friend, but an old *acquaintance*? Somethin’ fucked up goin’ on here.”

“Wy, Mama and Daddy said no more swearin’! You owe the jar fifty cents.” The middle child sounded morally offended.

“I don’t owe nothin’, cause you two ain’t tellin’ on me.”

“But ‘f’ is the worst one of all,” chirped in the youngest girl, scandalized. “That’s like HBO talk.”

Hannibal gradually realized he was not going to escape a confrontation with the small humans apparently created by Grady and his wife Pauline.

The children had just gone over to their Aunt's house to make gingerbread houses when he had arrived the night before -- whereupon he had immediately showered like his life depended on it, tossed pajamas on and flopped onto the bed, not caring that it would probably take five such beds to properly accommodate him. He'd been asleep within seconds, literally before a child's bedtime, and every dream that pursued him until two minutes ago was about Will -- of Will rejecting him, or loving and wanting him, beautiful Will, dizzying him with yearning.

He sat up in the dark blue bed, which was unfortunately shaped like a racecar in another addition to his ongoing indignity. After pulling his sleepmask up and placing it, headband-like in his hair to fix his automatically disastrous morning hair situation, Hannibal politely folded his hands in his lap, grateful at least that the retrieval of his luggage meant he wore his own comfortable and elegant navy blue silk pajamas.

"Good morning, children," he greeted with all the patience he could muster. "May I request the pleasure of your acquaintance?"

"I'm Wyatt," said the eldest, a skinny tow-headed boy who looked like a nine year old Grady. "This here's my sister P.J., that stands for Pauline Junior, and my other sister, Magnolia."

"You can call me Maggie if you want, or Magnolia," drawled little Magnolia, adorable in an old-fashioned yellow nightgown with puffed short sleeves and a pair of white, fluffy bunny slippers.

Her sister P.J., the quiet storm of the three, wore a large pair of black framed, round glasses which looked a bit too big for her face. They magnified her hazel eyes and long, light lashes which matched those of her siblings. "I'm seven and Maggie's five. I've lost five teeth so far and Maggie's lost two."

"These two," Magnolia put in helpfully. She opened her mouth and showed off the gap where her front teeth used to be. "The tooth fairy brought me a coloring book and a box of animal crackers. Wyatt is done losin' teeth and he doesn't believe in the tooth fairy anymore though."

"Cause there ain't no tooth fairy, it's just Mama and Daddy, silly. Same as Santa."

"Wyatt, that's plain rude," P.J. objected, hugging a large volume of *Anne of Green Gables* to her chest. "Mag's too little for all that cynicalist sort of thing." She sniffed with an obvious sense of superiority, perhaps equally doubtful of the tooth fairy and Santa's existence, but far too polite to say so.

She wore a polka dot pajama set and very sensible grey slippers, while her brother, to no one's surprise given the room's decor, had on race-car patterned pajamas.

"It's *cynical,* you big baby," Wyatt cackled, elbowing P.J., who glared at him and waved the book above her head threateningly.

She was the most relatable of the three children, Hannibal decided. However, the longer he listened to their innocent small talk and bickering, they gradually began to melt away his reserve and original inclination to find them annoying. There was something pleasant about their simple precociousness that took the edge off his own stress.

"*I'm the baby,*" said Magnolia very proudly. "Stranger who borrowed Wyatt's bed, how old are you?"

"I am Dr. Hannibal Lecter, delighted to meet you. I'm forty-seven," Hannibal explained cordially. "I lost all of my baby teeth many years ago. Very pleased to hear that you've been

progressing so well in that area."

P.J. lowered the book and adjusted her glasses. "Heard you're a doctor. Is that a lot of school?"

"Practically neverending school," Hannibal confided with a warm smile. "Are you interested in a career in medicine, potentially?"

"She's gonna be a writer, but she's always askin' tons of questions about different jobs and places so she can use them in her stories," Wyatt said in a warning tone. "Don't tell her anything you don't want published for the world to see someday."

"All geniuses struggle with being misunderstood," P.J. snipped.

"Even Moana was misunder– um, um, her parents didn't understand why she wanted to go to the water, but she saved her people in the end," Magnolia contributed sagely, winding a curly blonde lock around one finger.

"That's spoilers, Mag," Wyatt scowled.

"Quite alright," Hannibal replied smoothly. "If I should ever wish to view the film *Moana,* I will feel confident knowing it has a happy ending. I'm rather worn out with sad ones. And P.J., your brother's confidence in your future success as a writer is more than evident from his attempt to protect me lest you share all of my secrets with the world."

"Aha! That's right," P.J. grinned. "So you do believe in me, Wy."

Wyatt's scowl deepened. "I never said–"

"*Breakfast!*" Pauline yelled from downstairs, sounding as if she had just been electrocuted.

Hannibal's eyes widened as he reached for his robe and pulled it on, tying it neatly before going down to join the family for the morning meal.

"Don't mind Mama, she's not a morning person," Wyatt informed Hannibal as they walked down the slightly creaky-floored hallway towards the stairs. "Daddy's a morning person and that makes her even more pissed off."

"Twenty-five cents in the jar for 'pissed off'," P.J. murmured.

"Where do the funds from the swear jar go?" Hannibal asked curiously. "It sounds as if they earn a robust profit."

"That's what I've been sayin'," Wyatt grumbled. He grasped the bannister at the top of the stairs and stomped down, leading the pack, among whom Hannibal already felt oddly at home, as if he was the fourth child in the family. "Seems to me they probably use the same damn – *dang* money to pay my allowance, then turn around and ask me for it and stick it in that jar."

"I see," Hannibal noted. "Upsetting from your perspective, but an impressive system."

All three children's slippers flip-flopped cheerfully as Hannibal looked at the happy family photos in bright-colored frames on the wall. A wistfulness for his own lost future of a domestic and cozy life made him suppress a sigh.

They walked through the living room, a cherry red-walled place set up as a tv den with a cushy couch and several child-sized bean bag chairs. The entire room was currently overfilled with near-countless boxes of Christmas decorations, and a crooked fake tree had been crammed distractedly in the corner.

The chaos continued in the kitchen, where a burned aroma suggested the sizzling pancakes in the skillet were not entirely going to plan.

"Hon, I'm so sorry, I'd love to stay and help you cook, but I gotta go," Grady said sincerely, hovering beside his wife, who looked about ready to smack someone or something, anything or anyone really, with the spatula in her hand.

"I know, I know. Go save humanity and I'll sort this out. I think I need to use more butter for the next batch is all." Pauline kissed Grady briefly and slid a few blackened discs of buttermilk chaos onto a plate.

"Well, good mornin', noble progeny, and of course, our distinguished guest." Grady finished placing the top on his to-go coffee tumbler and patted each child's head.

"Good morning, Grady. I'm deeply grateful, and to you as well, Pauline, for the hospitality," Hannibal said, feeling relatively sincere on the subject despite his overall anxiety at being in Angel Wood at all, never mind with a broken-down car, staying with Will's best friend, and having to face Will again later, knowing Will hated him. He pasted on a smile which he hoped did not look too terrifying.

Magnolia hopped up and down with her arms outstretched and Grady set the coffee down, scooping her up and kissing her soft little cheek.

"It's no problem, couldn't just leave you sittin' there on main street lookin' all forlorn and such, 'specially this close to Christmas." Grady shrugged, rocking his daughter back and forth while the other kids scurried about getting their breakfast food and drinks.

"*It's comin' on Christmas, they're cuttin' down trees,*" Pauline muttered at the skillet. "And I think I used to be a *fairly* good cook before I had kids."

"No one can fault you for feeling overburdened at this busy time of year, with three little ones to look after," Hannibal reasoned, cupping his hands around the mug of coffee he had just poured for himself. He blew on it and took a tentative sip before adding, "Particularly when they are off school on holiday break."

"You're not kiddin'," Pauline agreed. She had the sort of natural red hair that never looked real; bright as carrots, currently shoved into a scrunchy with little reindeer charms and bells jingling on it.

That same red hair highlighted the three children's medium blonde tone, Hannibal observed, always intrigued to see how DNA and fate would divide the traits of both parents and pass them on. He rather despised the origin of this interest, which had never gone away: he wondered what his and Will's children would have looked like.

He'd never thought of having children with anyone else, although his bed had rarely been cold in the years since their parting.

Or hadn't it?

Shrugging off the sad thoughts, only to find they clung to him more stubbornly than the dust of Old River Road, Hannibal reached for an apron hanging from the closet door.

"Might I make you a new batch of pancakes?" he asked – requested, really – anything to take his mind off of Will.

"You're a lifesaver," Pauline sighed as Grady tried to politely refuse. Husband and wife glanced at each other; never had a silent conversation been ended so quickly by a look on a wife's face.

"Thanks for helpin' out with breakfast, Hannibal," Grady said with a forced, toothy grin. Pauline smiled her approval, whipped off her apron and sat down for a rest.

"It's the least I can do before departing for the Chateau." He almost winced at the thought, knowing he'd run out of reasons to procrastinate his "homecoming."

Grady raised his voice, as if attempting to muffle Hannibal's loudly awkward presence in his home: "I'm out, see y'all later! After today, Daddy won't have to go back to work again until after New Year's!"

The children cheered and Pauline added a wan "*Yaaaay,*" nonetheless blowing a kiss to her husband, which he returned.

Hannibal could not help but notice the single-serving boxes of Froot Loops and Apple Jacks which Grady had slipped into the pockets of his coat. He recalled that Will's friend always had an addiction to sugary snacks; clearly, some things never changed.

Even if others…changed far too much. He never would have thought Will could look at him with so much disgusted hatred. But was that hatred real? If real, was it permanent?

Hannibal stood beside Grady, who was shoving various file folders and legal pads into a worn leather messenger bag. The strap looked about ready to give out.

"Grady, I know there is no love lost between us due to Will's feelings on the subject of…" He cleared his throat.

"You?" Grady asked after removing a blue pen from his teeth and tossing it into the bag as well. "Shit, where're my glasses?"

Hannibal pointed to his neck, where the glasses hung from a chain over his tweed jacket and maroon tie.

“Ah. Thanks, *not*-my old-buddy, old-pal.” Grady tried to make a fast departure, but there was one question Hannibal had to pursue a little further.

“As such, that is with regard to the ‘no love lost’ and my general reputation as the evil, unforgivable scoundrel, I’m curious why you so charitably picked me up in my time of need last night, much less allowed me to stay in your lovely home.”

Hannibal targeted Grady with an incisive look. He knew the man wasn’t dishonest and that this would present a difficulty if – as Hannibal desperately hoped and pined to know – if Will was the one responsible for his rescue. If Will had rescued him a second time by proxy.

“Yeah, well.” Grady tried to elbow past. Hannibal, much bigger, stayed where he was.

“Did Will ask you to help me by any chance?” He supposed his normally imposing appearance must be tampered with by the passionate hope in his eyes, but he could do nothing about that.

“If he *did*, which I am by no means sayin’ he did,” Grady drawled, almost as annoyed as a mellow person like him could possibly get, “It would be the least you could do to let it remain unspoken and a secret, since that’s what he would want. *If he asked me to help you, which I am by no means sayin’* --”

Hannibal chortled. “Thank you, Grady. Have a wonderful day at work.”

"Okay....well, bon voyage to the Chateau and all that. Tell your Uncle we said 'get well soon.'" Grady slipped past him, finally escaping as Hannibal confronted the day with a new sprig of zest in his heart.

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“Holy guacamole, I was only tryin’ to make buttermilk – what all even –” Pauline looked down at the stack of chocolate-peppermint pancakes on her plate.

“Forgive me, Pauline; it has been a few days since I have had the pleasure of cooking, and I may have gone a little overboard.” Hannibal pointed to each plate in turn. “Since you were kind enough to give me full run of the kitchen, I made ample use of the many splendid ingredients you had on hand. There are peppermint hot chocolate, coconut cream and my personal favorite, dutch apple cinnamon.”

The kids immediately dug into their pancakes, not even sparing a moment for “ooh’s and ahh’s” of excitement. They simply praised the delicious food at the same time they ate, and for once, Pauline was too distracted to tell them to slow down or not talk with their mouth full.

“But these apples were American when I bought ‘em,” she said confusedly, examining the food before choosing one of each type to try. “Oh, my word. Where did you learn to cook like

this?"

"I'm mainly self taught," he shrugged, picking at his own plate, getting down a couple of apple pancakes to sustain him for a day when he was really far too nervous to be eating much. "A hobby that helps me to ease the stress of my work. The hospital is fast-paced and lives are at stake every moment. To slow down and luxuriate over a complex and challenging recipe, to take the time to unfold the intricate beauty of a new one…it truly does help 'take the edge off,' as it were."

"I suppose it were," Pauline said with a grin. "Golly did my mornin' just get better! These chocolate ones are heavenly. Say, can we keep you or what?"

"Beg pardon?" Hannibal inquired, stirring cream into his second coffee.

"Well, are you dead-set on stayin' at the Chateau while you're here in town, or would you like a little break from the family like sometimes, God knows we all do at Christmas? Only sayin' if you'd be willin' to stay on and help me with the cooking, I'd be pleased as punch to have you. I need all the help I can get."

"An intriguing and appreciated suggestion, but…won't Grady object? I don't believe I am one of his favorite people."

Pauline laughed. "I'll talk him into it. You seem really nice, anyway, and you did last night, so courteous, respectful and appreciative, what's his problem with you, anyway? No offense, but he doesn't really have problems with people normally."

"Despite being a pro bono attorney?" Hannibal chuckled. "I'd think he'd have some of the more ruthless opponents to basic humanism to contend with on the prosecution side. Worse still, the kind with deep pockets."

*Like my uncle.* Robertus owned many businesses, and plenty of them had been shut down for unsafe working conditions. He cared more about the maximum profit than the well-being of his own workers, and this despite the established wealth of the Lecters. They didn't need the money. He didn't need the clout. They were Lithuanian nobility, but that same fame and fortune gave Robertus free reign for his cruel machinations.

"That's different, that's work and it's on the grand ethical realm. As far as rivals, shoot – Grady never even had a frenemy. Eat some fruit too, kids, and make sure you say thank you to Dr. Lecter for the lovely breakfast."

"Thank you and please stay," P.J. encouraged, jubilantly sipping orange juice, having cleared her plate. "Please?"

"If you're cookin', I'm good with it, heck, I'm *on board*!" Wyatt added.

"Do you make anything pink?" Magnolia asked winningly. "That's my very favorite color, tied with fuschia and glittery aqua."

“I can certainly contrive to make you something in each of those charming shades.” Hannibal smiled at the little girl before the kids went off to play, leaving a clatter of empty plates and cups in their wake.

“That’s two dollars off y’all’s allowances for not clearin’ your plates!” Pauline called down the hallway where her children had gone running for the playroom and their toys.

“I know you’re only gonna take it from the swear jar anyway, Mama, I’m on to you!” Wyatt replied.

“That little…” she sighed and stuck a candy cane garnish from the hot chocolate pancakes into her coffee.

“You must have heard something about…” Hannibal ventured delicately, “That is, Miss Greer has surely told you that Will Graham and I have a history.”

Pauline’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit, yeah. Charlie did mention that, but after sayin’ you were the scum of the earth, she told me you weren’t worth the breath she’d spend elaboratin’ about your wicked deeds.”

“She has never had a problem with sharing her opinions quite vividly." Shamed by his bad reputation among Will’s closest friends, he fiddled with his silverware, cheeks flaming as if he’d just been reprimanded at school. “In this case, her point of view is hardly surprising. Will seems to regard our former relationship with deep regret. ”

Charlie’s ill opinion was merely the echo of Will’s own…worse still, the echo of Will’s pain. And he still did not even know all the reasons for Will’s bitterness.

“I take it y’all had a torrid love, later consumed by fate’s nefarious inferno,” Pauline said with a discerning look, the steel of knowledge now infusing her words.

“As it just so happens,” Hannibal allowed. “But what made you draw that conclusion?”

“Well.” She turned behind her and grabbed a weathered paperback from the counter by the toaster. Displaying it, she said proudly, “I know a little somethin’ about those desperate affairs that crash and burn, and the unbearable, unspeakable passion they leave in their wake.”

Her dramatic tone helped Hannibal to find amusement in the struggle of his explanation. And the cover of the thick paperback she held up made him laugh warmly.

“*Mistletoe, Cowboys, and Second Chances?*” Hannibal read the cover, taking in the sight of its steamy image.

The heroine, a busty brunette whose facial expression caused an almost audible “moan” to hop right off the cover, wore a low-cut red negligee trimmed in white fur. Behind her, a considerably taller, muscular man wearing apparently nothing but a black cowboy hat had his fingers slipped under the red straps of her nightgown. A darkly lustful glare glittered in his eyes.

Next to the central couple, there was a second, blonde cowboy, just slightly less handsome (Hannibal preferred the hero with his brown hair and beard), looking at the passionate pair with jealousy.

"*'This Christmas, will Noelle choose her present security…or the tempting passion of her past?'"* Hannibal nodded his approval. "A compelling tagline."

"Right?" Pauline said with great emphasis, her red eyebrows lifting almost into her feathery bangs. "But from anything I ever read, Christmas is the number one season for second chances. If you really messed things up that badly and you wanna make it right, this is the year, and this is the season."

"I see." He took the dishes to the sink, barely acknowledging her words of thanks, too wrapped up in his thoughts.

"Like, as in, it might be your last chance," Pauline added, "I mean you and Will. This Christmas. If you don't win his heart back, you'll probably lose him forever."

"A brutally honest assessment, but I must concur." He frowned.

"Just think on it is all," she advised sagely, pointing with one fake red nail bedazzled with candy canes and white gems. "I can't see much reason for two nice people who might still be in love to stay apart, not during the most romantic damn time of the whole year. There's all that magic in the air. You gotta take advantage."

"I will…certainly think on it," Hannibal nodded. "Thank you, Pauline, I did need to 'talk that out' with someone who did not consider me the most despicable person to spoil Christmas since Ebenezer Scrooge…scrooged."

"Well now, don't forget, Scrooge found redemption." She tossed the filter from that morning's coffee into the trash, only to plop a fresh one in and start ladling Folgers into it.

Hannibal smiled gratefully at her optimism on his behalf, then went up to his…well. To Wyatt's room, and gathered apparel for the day from his bag. He lugged the suit, along with his complete collection of male beauty products to the bathroom with its shocking blue walls and shower curtain covered in cartoon fish.

Once he was clean, shaved, lotioned and fragranced, he was fully satisfied that a second shower had done the job of thoroughly removing the dust and grit of yesterday's ordeal from his illustrious person.

He eschewed his jacket and tie, attempting to appear "relaxed" and protect himself somewhat from melting in the December heat wave. In a pine green button down shirt, topped off by a tan single breasted, slim-fitted waistcoat, he had to conclude he looked very dashing, even when he attempted to consider his reflection from outside his own anxious yet egotistical perspective.

He turned half around and glanced at his ass, hugged by the dark blue trousers which were the closest item he had to "jeans." Quite flattering, he concluded, even deciding to leave the

first two buttons on the shirt undone.

If it was possible for Hannibal Lecter to look down to earth, approachable yet sexy, he had achieved the goal. The only real reason for the effort was a gorgeous, irresistible mechanic who despised him. He was going to see Will later, and he wanted to make up for the dreadful impression he had made the night before, how terrible he must have looked…he shuddered to think.

Fastening his brown and gold cufflinks, he nodded to his face as if he actually believed he was going to triumph, not only at the Chateau, but also in his evening encounter with Will. It was only the recurring thought, *season of redemption and second chances,* which bolstered his ambition in both matters.

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The Chateau had changed, Hannibal supposed once he was within its high, mighty gates, and yet it had not. Anytime he stepped inside the entrance onto the sprawling property with its huge mansion, impressive and far-ranging garden, three swimming pools, two jacuzzis, an in-house movie theatre (seldom used), and large adjoining horse farm, he wanted to run. He felt trapped. So many outsiders in town would love the chance to try the luxurious Lecter life, but Hannibal felt it like a noose tightening around his neck.

Old River Road, by comparison, didn't seem so bad now he was actually back at Weeping Willow Chateau. He had told Pauline he'd think about her offer of staying on longer at the Larsons'. Despite the insensitivity to Will which such a move might constitute, he was very tempted. He could spend the holidays with a nice, kind family and have a higher chance of seeing Will, instead of being locked up behind the gates that held out the common world and represented too many bad old associations.

Although Pauline and Grady Larson's house had a land line, Hannibal had neglected to call his family and inform them of his car trouble and subsequent delay in paying his respects at "home," quite intentionally in fact. The normally "rude" omission had been selfishly enacted in an effort to protect himself from Robertus sending one of his fine cars to fetch him, as in days of old.

It made his skin crawl to think of ever again riding in one of his uncle's gleaming Rolls Royces. If indeed he did see a penny of his inheritance, he intended to spend it on charitable causes. He'd choke on it before he used the blood money to buy anything for himself. And he had established himself. He did not need the money.

He was here now because he thought he might provide help and solace to Chiyoh and Murasaki, and the servants with their unaccountable affection for the old man – well, perhaps more accountable considering how generous and charming Robertus was to his staff and business associates, how mean-spirited towards his own nephew.

And he had come because…this was his duty as a Lecter. Perhaps some knee-jerk instinct, instilled by multiple traumas, kept him loyal to what he owed the family name, to the dignity he should uphold.

The staff were not fanned out in front of the house to formally greet him, thank goodness, and the house when he entered it was so bone silent, a chill ran through him. It was so hot outside by eleven am that he ought to feel relieved upon exiting the car he'd borrowed from Pauline and walking into the mansion with its perfect air conditioning.

It was not a relief.

He could immediately go upstairs, of course, as his uncle was almost certainly shut up in his bedroom in a suitably Victorian homage to his own disintegrating, noble force of life. But he still felt inclined to avoid the encounter for the time being, choosing instead to stride across the hauntingly familiar marble floors and open the french doors which led to the elegant outdoor patio by the largest of the swimming pools.

There, his jaw dropped slightly as he took in the sight of his ailing uncle, pale and obviously sickly, yet *not* crumpling nobly into demise upon his bed. Robertus sat in a lounge chair, holding a martini and crossing his legs at the ankles as if this was 1993 and nothing had altered in his situation. It was like an insane time machine had transported him to the sight of his uncle sitting right there day drinking and gossiping snidely about everyone he knew, wearing the same summer suit (or a more recent recommissioning of it) which had been too *Miami Vice* even twenty years ago.

Robertus, lecturing and droning on about his astonishing talents and everyone's dirty secrets while Murasaki did her nails and Chiyoh swam laps, there it all was again. Robertus was even in the middle of a sentence that went, "And of course I've always known the Dawson family were trash, their prospects barely worthy of collecting to pad my own portfolio, but I was charitable enough to take their house off their hands…"

At the same time his wanly evil voice trailed off, curtailed first by a cough and then by noticing his prodigal nephew standing there staring at the whole scene, Hannibal observed that in addition to his aunt filing her nails and nursing a sloe gin fizz and his surrogate sister slicing through the brilliant turquoise water, there was someone new in the otherwise classic group.

None other than Charlie Greer, Will Graham's best friend and one of the most vehement members of the Hannibal Lecter is Terrible fan society, sat at the umbrellaed table with Murasaki, as if they had been friends for a million years.

Charlie wore bold apple red cat-eyed sunglasses and a strapless, stylishly ruched red bikini, and her long, braided tresses were gathered into two loose ponytails. Her long legs were stretched out and she had even propped her feet up on another chair. Further adding to the shock of the entire scenario, Charlie had a pedicure toe separator on her foot, and she was in the process of painting her toes bright white, when suddenly she looked up and saw Hannibal, and then she snorted a laugh, polish dripping onto her foot from the distraction.

If Hannibal had *ever* sat like that with his feet up, much less performing any part of his beauty routine, at his uncle's table, he would have been scolded – even during the summer when he was twenty-seven – as if he was an unruly toddler and an embarrassment to the family.

It was always well and good for Murasaki to act in such a manner, and his step-aunt often pointed out his lack of objection to her own conduct. To which Robertus clarified the lady of the house must do as she liked, also a lie. He controlled his wife viciously, if more subtly, and in different ways.

His aunt was the first one to surmount her surprise at his appearance now and come to greet him, exclaiming happily, “Hannibal, you are here at last!”

Murasaki clasped Hannibal’s hands and smiled her sad, elegantly tired smile, crimson and tainted with unshed tears. “Now the holidays may truly begin. How we have missed having you with us."

Ah. Hannibal saw how it was. Murasaki and Chiyoh were acting normally, going with the flow of a typical Christmas at the Chateau, because that was what Robertus wanted: to have his sickness ignored while he carried on with his usual selfish enjoyments. Preserve his dignity and all that.

“Utter balderdash,” Robertus croaked, still looking like an older version of his nephew with his chiseled features and the full head of silver hair which had never waned. He picked up a financial magazine from the table beside him and opened it with a loud flap. “As usual, you turn up when you believe it will benefit you, and even then you are shamefully late.”

His skin was tanned but his overall demeanor made him seem pale and reduced in spite of the pride he would carry to the last. There was death in his eyes, the fight receded from his figure which had gone from strong to skinny. Even without the weight loss or the creaking voice which had once been stentorian, Robertus’ sheer force of will seemed to be in a constant state of battle against a body rattling with the impending promise of demise.

“*Balderdash,*” Charlie mouthed dramatically to Hannibal. She smirked and began removing the stray polish from her foot with a cotton ball soaked in remover.

“Hello, Lady Murasaki, it is always a pleasure to see you. I hope that you are well. Charlie, what an unexpected delight.” Hannibal’s smile hurt his jaw. His teeth kept trying to clench, but he infused every damned word with his own insistent, cheerful pride. “Uncle.”

Chiyoh wore a sleek, one-piece white swimsuit with matching goggles, and she seemed to add a splash of human reality to that pool which always looked, out of everything on the estate, especially out of place in the land of swamps and rivers, long grass, country kitsch and laid-back, rustic, old-fashioned romance.

She reached the far end of the pool and glanced up, only then noticing her brother’s arrival. Then she beamed and emerged from the water, grabbing a fluffy white towel and wrapping it around herself, no need for much more than a loose drape when it was this hot out.

So she was still dripping pool water when she approached Hannibal and kissed both his cheeks, declaring winsomely, “Happy Christmas, Hannibal. So glad to see you safely arrived.”

“Happy Christmas, Chiyoh. How have you been?” He slipped his hands into his pants’ pockets and tried to let his sister’s presence make it possible for his stiff shoulders to relax.

The sun beat down on his head. Murasaki and Chiyoh smiled, his uncle glared, and Charlie slipped a melon slice into her mouth, smirking as if she was watching a favorite reality show.

“Oh, very well, thank you, and yourself?”

“Yes, quite.” Hannibal signaled to the butler, Brummel, a classy Southern gentleman with a thick mustache and a prim, traditional uniform.

Brummel came over at once with an enthused greeting to the long-missed nephew of the grand house. “Oh, it’s the young master, as I live and breathe–”

“An ice water, please, Brummel, and by contrast, the warmest holiday greetings to you and your family,” was the best Hannibal could do for a cordial salutation.

He didn’t want the staff fawning over him with nostalgic affection and questions about his amazing life.

It would only remind him he had never belonged here, any more than the orphanage in Lithuania, his luxurious studio apartment at college and the penthouse he bought himself during medical school, the stunning house he now owned in Baltimore. He never belonged anywhere, except perhaps down by the river under the wide, full moon’s glow, tangled up with Will in countless ways, twenty years ago, possibly – probably a sense of belonging he’d never touch again.

Normally, he loved to brag, but doing so on the estate would make him feel sicker than his uncle. He had made a man of himself, a successful, wealthy, powerful and admired man of the world, a renowned surgeon and a life-saving hero, and he did not need to boast of it in front of the uncle who had always told him he was worthless and incapable. His accomplishments spoke for themselves, and he preferred to leave it at that.

To evoke either his uncle’s insults or his reluctant compliments – he’d prefer almost anything to having to listen. His uncle’s voice was the sound of his own self-loathing that lived in his brain to this day, and he didn’t want to draw it to his own appraisal any more than was unavoidable.

“Very good, sir,” Brummel offered, confusion brewing in his eyes. He had always chosen, as so many fine servants do, in their deluded fits of devotion, to see the best in the whole family, especially Grand Duke Robertus.

Of course the total lack of affectionate concern in Hannibal’s expression towards his uncle and the young master’s overall discomforted loathing of being there at Weeping Willow was unaccountable to the butler.

“And please, bring out some of those tea sandwiches, a fresh round of drinks with a martini for the young master,” Muraskai instructed Brummel.

“Perhaps the macaroons as well, your Ladyship?” Brummel hovered in place by the table, holding a tray containing the remnants of earlier food and drink.

The whole scene, the denial of it all, caused Hannibal to compare his uncle to Miss Havisham in his mind, as if his own life was the wedding he would never let end despite it being forcibly taken away.

And of course, the family were almost always out of doors. Hannibal did not quite know why he had felt so sure his uncle would be wasting away on a four-poster canopied bed when he could be here, showing off his defiance, even without virility, his rebellion against mortality itself: the ultimate stubborn Lecter pride.

Hannibal sat down, with the outer appearance of perfect serenity, in the unoccupied chair at the table and gulped his ice water down in three goes when it swiftly appeared before him, the glass already sweating from the contrast between inside the house and outside.

The fast and reckless decision had given him brain freeze, so that it bothered him twice as much when Chiyoh said cheerfully, “Hannibal, this is my lover, Charlie. I think you two knew each other years ago, when you visited the Chateau before…”

“Your *lover,*” Charlie repeated, grinning. “Baby, you make me sound fancy.”

“You’re more than worth being called ‘fancy’ and a thousand other lovely things,” Chiyoh answered, kissing her briefly, stars in her eyes.

Of all the partners his sister might find in Angel Wood, naturally it had to be this woman who disliked him. Of course. It remained to be seen how Chiyoh would deal with her girlfriend speaking negatively of her brother, of whom she was very fond.

“You’re part of the family now, Charlene,” Robertus said from behind his magazine. He shivered, a bad indication of his internal temperature being askew. “You had better get used to being referred to in suitably lofty, florid terms.”

“Charlene?” Hannibal raised his light brows with a subtle smirk of his own.

“Shut up,” Charlie rolled her eyes, her fingers threaded through Chiyoh’s on the glass tabletop.

On top of everything difficult in this situation, now he had to contend with feelings of jealousy for their obviously besotted and committed state. Wonderful. He tried to be happy for Chiyoh despite it all. She deserved to smile as she did now.

He tried not to resent her for being outside the obligations of the official Lecter line to marry fellow nobility, for money, status and property, to secure the family name. Chiyoh could love whomever she chose without his uncle’s judgment. Robertus had always been more lenient with his ward, because he could, it being a fun hobby for him to show affection for his not-daughter while letting Hannibal feel his own inferiority in the contrast.

Nonetheless, he felt as sullen as his former self from 1993 and worse.

“I suppose someone told you I’m dying, Hannibal.” Robertus lowered his magazine, his eyes shining with sarcastic disdain for the idea. “Which is utter nonsense, of course. It will take more than another old age ailment to make me grow old and die. So although you’re obviously here to await your inheritance, it’s a waste of your time.”

“It’s always such a treat to see you, Uncle Robertus.” As the fire of his own aggravated hate for the mean old man churned within him, Hannibal stood and walked to his uncle’s chair with his merriest smile. Hannibal seemed open-hearted and sincere. It came from fierce self-protection and harsh loathing.

“However, I am concerned for your health. I can clearly see that you’re suffering chills despite the temperature being a heady 87 degrees. You also appear wan and have lost weight. Would you do me the goodness to share what your doctors have said by way of prognosis?”

“I will do no such thing, you entitled hypocrite.”

“A fascinating epitaph, all things considered.” Hannibal’s smile expanded, nearly a sneer. “I’ve always enjoyed impressive feats of irony. If I cannot be privy to the details of your illness, might I at least accompany you inside and help you to bed? It would certainly do you good to rest.”

It was an intriguing combination of feelings. He actually gave his uncle his best, most accurate advice based on scant knowledge of the ailment.

Murasaki had even been excluded from Robertus’ private examinations with his world-class doctors. She knew he had severe diabetes which he never took proper care of, and that he had barely recovered from a recent bout of pneumonia. That would be quite enough reason for rest, hydration and delicate treatment of oneself, perhaps an on-site nutritionist to help his uncle regain his balance. This would all involve admitting vulnerability.

The denial piece made Hannibal suspect dementia was also at play. With anyone else in the world, save perhaps a few despicable specimens, he would feel great sympathy.

He might even savor his uncle’s miserable humiliation if he let himself, but he did not choose to let this complicated holiday become bogged down by negativity, feelings which Will would find awful if he knew of them. What would Will say, after all? He’d always encouraged Hannibal to get out of Robertus’ shadow, not become a corrupted sequel to him with a soul full of hate that left no room for love, much less self-love.

So he’d be kind, allowing himself the very small hint of amusement he derived by Robertus’ annoyed responses to his own composure and intelligent remarks, his appropriate solicitude, which they both knew was insincere.

“Absolutely not. I will do as I like, let the chips fall where they may. Wait and see with the rest of those eagerly hoping for my decline. I’ll outlive them all.” Robertus took a sip of his martini to prove his point, turning slightly red. He should be drinking water. Eating fruits and vegetables, not caviar, fois gras heaped on thin, overpriced wafer crackers, not rich desserts.

Hannibal gave a small bow of noble assent, then returned to the others feeling a bit more like his normal self. “So,” he chirped pleasantly while his uncle fumed silently beside them in his solitary way. “To happy reunions?”

“Happy reunions,” the others all chimed in, except for Charlie, who giggled, “*judging youuuuu*” but enjoyed her drink all the same.

He took a sip of his own martini, knowing himself to be still young, vibrant and full of chances, as it suddenly seemed. He remembered about the season of redemption and Pauline’s advice, remembered Will’s haunting blue stare and the way it wasn’t only hate he saw in the intense envelopment. How Will might very well have asked Grady to help him, let him stay the night at his house.

It all seemed very promising and so he reached out for a cucumber sandwich, sitting up straight but with relaxed shoulders and his most engaging demeanor.

“So, then, what is everyone doing for Christmas?”

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal feels ready to face Will again! But how will their next present-time encounter go? 🤔

Next chapter is already drafted and will be up shortly 💕💕

# Keep it to yourself

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Will. Now.**

The day flew by, and that never happened. Will groaned, tossing down his latest greasy rag from fixing the Bentley, realizing as the clock struck five pm: he'd finished, the car was better than ever, and Hannibal would arrive, any time now, to collect it. *Fuck.*

He was damn near tempted to tamper with the car, break it so Hannibal would be forced to stay longer, and just as nearly tempted to pussy out of meeting his ex again, just call one of his friends to come and hang here, give Hannibal back his keys, refuse his fat check.

He could just fucking hide and wait for it all to be over, Hannibal, Christmas, blah blah blah, only it never seemed to be over. No matter what he did or how hard he tried. Nothing was fair!

Will washed up in the small, clean and neat bathroom in the garage of his shop and ran a hand through his curls, arranging them to the most attractive version of unruly they could sort of achieve. He noticed that his cheeks were beguilingly flushed, his eyes alive with immense anticipation for the first time he could remember in…God knows.

Not even Frederick had made him feel this way, not once, even when it was good (or seemed good).

Here he was, patting on a fresh helping of his favorite sandalwood aftershave and wondering if Hannibal would think he fucking *smelled good.* Looked good. In his tight white t-shirt and well-fitting old blue jeans, a little sweaty. Tired but invigorated from a day of hard work and pride in his labor. His independence.

Will knew he looked damn good. But he didn't feel very goddamn independent at the moment because anyone could see he was pining to see the literal, actual worst person on the planet, like he was liable to start plucking daisy petals, swooning, *he loves me, he loves me not.*

"This is some bullshit," he mumbled, exiting the bathroom and stretching, getting out some of the aches in his muscles.

He had a brief, potent flashback of how Hannibal's strong, healing hands used to expertly massage him until he thought he'd melt into the sheets.

"*Dammit!*" Will picked up the nearest wrench, thought about flinging it through a window to ease his confused agony, his intolerable excitement, setting himself up for another idiotic disappointment. The whole dumbass deal. How stupid Hannibal made him, years and experience be damned.

He put the wrench down. That wasn't going to make him seem very professional, damaging his own property after working so hard to get this business off the ground. Instead, he rolled his shoulders back and grabbed a beer from the fridge, brought it out to the bench in front of his shop and took a long, cold sip.

He flung one arm over the back of the bench, firm bicep glistening in the lazy early evening sun, curls at their damp but fluffy best, lips petulantly wet, his legs straight out. Heart in restless knots.

Maybe he had to get closure. He'd stay put, see that through. Watch Hannibal drive off to the Chateau to spend his snobby stupid holiday with his dumb, rich relatives and forget he even saw Will again or spilled more sweet lies of true love. Then he'd feel release from this agony of artificial *waiting* that had held him captive for twenty years, surely.

Yeah, that was it.

"Oh, hey, Will, how's it hangin'?" Hollis Ellison, who ran the apothecary/malt shop, paused by the bench, fanning himself with his baseball cap that said "*a teaspoon of sugar helps the medicine go down, Ellison Apothecary and Malt Shop,*" all those words crammed in cursive being an amazing feat which boggled Will's tired eyes.

He nodded. "Hollis. Not so bad, I guess. Nice hat, is that new?"

"Ah - thank you – yes, we're sellin' 'em now. Come by sometime soon and I'll sneak you one for free," the friendly, balding man said, as if it wasn't his own business and he couldn't do whatever he wanted with his merch.

"Fantastic. Oh, hey, think I can pick your brain sometime soon over a budgeting issue I've come across?"

Every now and again, Will consulted Hollis on business matters, as he didn't know anyone in his age bracket who was so knowledgeable and successful as a small shop owner.

"Anytime, anytime, of course. Heard about that damn Jiffy Lube the Mayor's lettin' em build down on Honeysuckle, by Doc Curtis's office. I completely disagree with all these chains comin' in to ruin the rustic appeal of our community, and plan to air that out plainly at the next town hall– you're comin', of course?"

"Well, I ain't got a choice, Hollis – Mayor Earnshaw signed off on a Midas, too. What the hell, man?"

Hollis whistled, sitting beside Will and patting his knees, clad in his old school apothecary outfit, making him look like a cosplayer, but he didn't stand out because everyone was so used to it. It was kind of comforting, the reliability of the townspeople, the traditions. Will felt similarly inclined to cling to the nostalgic comforts, especially with so little else to hold onto.

"Yeah, now people are gonna have more than one place to get their oil changed and their cars fixed. You got competition, and it's the big guns. Suppose you'll be lookin' to expand the

shop, put on some extra rooms and add to your service menu, maybe hire on new staff."

"Exactly." Will pinched his brow and fought the urge to collapse into his hands, held off by another swig of beer. "Hey, you wanna talk about it now, maybe, over a cold one?"

He'd said 'tonight' to Hannibal, but that meant his ex could show up anytime. This pressing business was more important, he told himself, in no way nervous or terrified about seeing Hannibal, every time the sun dipped a tiny bit lower in the sky. In no way trying to use a benign platonic friend as a human shield to hold him back from Hannibal...or Hannibal back from him...

He could have called Grady's house on the landline to let Hannibal know when to come back, but that would reveal he knew about the scheme to give his former lover shelter. Cell phones were still out, of course. No texting to confirm the Bentley was ready. Whatever. If he didn't send one of the Lecter's servants to fetch his vehicle, that was. Will didn't care, either way, except it would be good to get closure, or something.

Hollis answered, "I can't stay tonight, bud, but thanks for the offer, I'll gladly take you up another time soon. You know number crunchin's my stress relief!"

Will smiled, but his face fell slightly when his friend continued speaking.

"I actually stopped by to talk to you briefly about somethin' else, and it does pain me to bring it up, us bein' friends and all. But see, it's about the twins…"

Will fought the urge to scream. "Before you even tell me what happened, allow me to apologize profusely. What the hell did they do now?"

"'Fraid I've had a pattern of stick candy, sour gummies and licorice goin' missin' right around the time when your kids drop into the store. I have heard similar stories from Darlene over at the Gas 'n Sip…"

Will pressed his hands to his denim-clad legs and heaved a sigh such as only a dad could ever sigh. "I hear ya, Hollis. I promise it won't happen again."

All of a sudden, Hannibal was there, hovering by the bench looking like he was in some kind of snit, glowering at Hollis of all people, his cinnamon eyes darting to Will, half-accusing, half-questioning. He must have strolled up slowly and quietly, examining the situation like a cat about to pounce. Grady's house was in easy walking distance of Main Street, and after yesterday's walk from Old River Road, this sensible exercise must have seemed like nothing. The exercise had left a flush of invigoration on Hannibal's cheeks, which were slightly shiny. His hair had changed, like his more mature face. It seemed as if one of those fans that blows on models at photoshoots was the only thing that could have gotten his hair like that, flicked attractively over his brow with a look of sexy unconcern.

These first impressions of the forty-seven year old Hannibal darted through him like arrows. In a vague sort of way, with the arrows piercing deeper into his heart, Will noticed as the apothecary went on in the background, now sounding like distant, fuzzy radio static, "*If it happens again, I'm afraid I will have to get the authorities involved…*"

And he thought that he said something mundane and true back, like "*Aww, don't worry, Hollis, it won't come to that,*" Despite knowing the kind-hearted Sheriff would give the twins barely a slap on the wrist, and that was if his friend even got proactive enough to call the cops. It didn't matter, none of it did, even the nagging pull of his worry and anger about the twins' misconduct momentarily fled his heart and mind.

He had been so sure that Hannibal wouldn't look as good as he used to, but looking at his ex now, it was mind-numbingly, heart-breakingly clear Hannibal looked better than ever. He was stunning. He was a silver fox with a killer body and a powerful charisma that would send anyone with a sex drive to their knees. He was wearing some kind of obnoxious outfit that looked like what Indiana Jones wore to the annual Archaeologists Society meeting at Yale or whatever.

It looked so fucking *good.*

Will's knees weakened and thank God he was sitting down. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Probably, the two men beside him introduced themselves to each other, although that was supposed to be his job, and then he said a quick, distracted, foggy goodbye to Hollis.

Sadly, an old and thoroughly relevant inside joke recurred to him, something that he used to laugh about with Grady and Charlie That Summer. Will always said that "Whatta Man" by Salt 'n Peppa and En Vogue played everytime Hannibal Lecter walked onto the scene, and that the whole world went into slow motion at the same time.

Hell if he didn't hear that goddamn song in his head again right then, clear as day, staring at the insanely attractive man before him!

"*My man is smooth like Barry, and his voice got bass*

*A body like Arnold with a Denzel face*

*He's smart like a doctor with a real good rep*"--

"Good evening, Will," Hannibal said curtly. His greeting cut through the '90's hip hop thirst of it all, and broke Will from his involuntary fantasy music video / romcom dream sequence.

"Good evening, Hannibal." Will blinked at him, remaining immobile on the bench, his heart banging a hammer into his ribs, his stomach fluttering in uncontrollable adrenaline. His hands were shaking.

"Are you quite alright?" the older man's slight dismay had faded into concern as he took Hollis' place by his ex-boyfriend's side.

Will fought the desire to pretend they were married and Hannibal came here everyday to walk him home from work. They'd work together to deal with the twins' juvenile delinquency and then Will would take a long shower while Hannibal cooked them all an amazing dinner. The family would watch cozy Christmas movies together, then after the twins were asleep downstairs, Hannibal would get Will alone. He'd smile at Will in the dark

of their bedroom, and he would say in his lowest, naughtiest tone, *"Now I have you all to myself."*

The impossibility of it all hit him upside the head like a slap from the universe. "I'm fine," he snapped, avoiding Hannibal's warm, searching gaze.

He shot to his feet and jerked his thumb towards the garage behind them. "Car's done."

"Very well. Thank you. It was lovely to meet your friend Hollis. An Apothecary is an admirable profession, too little seen in these modern days." Hannibal's mouth formed a flat line.

"Did that sound a little snide, Doctor Lecter?" Will folded his arms, facing his ex as they both stood, eyes locking instinctively, like magnets colliding full force.

The chemistry almost knocked him out. Jesus. So this was it again. This was how it felt to really be in love. He was so fucking doomed.

"It's only that perhaps some professions go out of vogue when they become irrelevant." There was no mistaking the familiar spark of jealousy in Hannibal's eyes, nor the way Will's body responded, the warm arousal quickly pooling in his belly and tightening, moving lower.

His skin was goosebumping, dammit. He stuck his hands on his hips.

"Bullshit," he smirked. "You love all things precious and overpriced. There's only one way you'd be deriding that man's occupation, instead of making a beeline down to his shop to check out his selection of hard to find high end aftershaves and ridiculously pompous nightshirts."

"I can't fathom your implication." Hannibal's tongue darted out to circle his plush lips as his dark gaze flickered longingly over Will from the very top twisting curl down to the soles of his work boots, lingering with heated fondness on his eyes, his lips, the lines of his muscles, his slim waist and his almost delicate hips– not knowing if the tattoo was still there under his clothes, of course–

"Hollis is not my boyfriend, Hannibal," Will snarked, rolling his eyes.

"Your occasional lover, then?" Still looking suspicious. "You were speaking quite intently, and you looked…piqued."

"Piqued? Really? No, he's not my fuck buddy either, not that it's any of your business."

"Oh, I see. Does he actually have ridiculously pompous nightshirts in stock? I should really make a call at his store while in town–"

"You're unbelievable," Will snarled. "For your information, he's just a really nice guy who sometimes helps me wrap my head around the business end of things here. And if I looked a little *piqued* and *intense,* it's most likely because he was telling me that my children have been stealing from his store again, along with the Gas 'n Sip, and that's pretty much the icing on the cake of my latest fucked up day. I guess you're the cherry on top."

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal smiled flirtatiously, more pleased with life with every moment he understood Will was single and also getting pissed off at him again.

The older man always did say Will was beautiful when he was angry. Nonsense, of course. It didn’t affect Will in the slightest.

Will flung his hands up. “You’re impossible.”

“As are you. An even match is often a perfect one, don’t you think?”

Hannibal took one step forward. He didn’t come into Will’s personal space but the minor indication of potential intimacy made Will’s head spin as if it was a porn-level action.

His voice was so, so…husky and throaty, deeper even than Will remembered it, and there were those amazing crinkles beside his eyes that creased when he did that annoying, cute little smile…thing. That hair, once only golden-brown, now shone in prismatic variations of silver-blonde and sunshine-mahogany, which was not fair.

The Indiana Jones outfit was stuck to Hannibal’s body like a second skin just begging to be ripped off, and the buttons on the handsome vest looked ready to burst under the strain of his powerful pectorals. He’d had the audacity to leave his collar open, showing off more exquisitely golden-tan skin, his strong throat that made all those unforgivably sexy noises, plus some greying chest hair that made Will lose a little bit more of his grip on reality as he glared, using the excuse to look and look and look.

Then he made the mistake of inhaling while he took another step forward in return, acting as if this was an angry confrontation and that was the only reason for the mild aggression.

Hannibal smelled like heaven, like…cool, glistening, crystal waters washing over Will’s resistance, like citrus and tropical breezes, and he gave off that kind of intense, quietly sensuous body heat that made a guy want to grab him and never let go until they both came about fifty times. No matter how hot it was weather-wise, Will wanted *hotter,* closer, fitting together so perfect like he *knew they would.*

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed, burning just as bright with lust all the same. *Accusatory* lust, which everyone knew was the hottest kind.

“Cat got your tongue, Will? I commented on your appearance last night, but you’ve yet to share your views on my own, now that I have cleaned up.”

Around them, the early evening dog walkers, people strolling home from work or getting ready to cross the street to the Gas ‘n Sip kept bustling along. Most locals knew the vague outline of Will and Hannibal’s epic forbidden affair from That Summer, or simply read the incendiary body language and threatening eye fucking well enough to know better than to approach the men. They might as well have been the only two people in town.

“You?” Will smiled cynically, his eyes maddeningly wet with more tears he had no intention of allowing to spill down his cheeks.

He staved off the whirlwind of shocking emotion – the reignition of his addiction to everything about this man, the memories of getting his heart so broken he thought he'd never get out of bed again, the realization he'd been forgotten and abandoned by the one person who meant *everything* to him – more than himself, more than anything he'd felt since.

His mean smile tightened. "You got old," he quipped drily. "Big deal."

Hannibal's flinch of self-conscious dismay was so, so very tiny that anyone else would have missed it. But it registered on Will's perceptions with the razor-sharp sensation of guilt at the lying way he was *lying*, making Hannibal think he disapproved the changes which the years had used to turn him even more gorgeous.

Hurting Hannibal didn't make Will feel good, despite how vehemently he'd put his futile aspirations into the effort; it only hurt himself.

"You said my car is ready." Hannibal's smile had died like a light abruptly shut off. His prideful walls were back up and his eyes were cutting. "Would you be so beneficent as to lead me to it? I'll ascertain the quality of your work and if satisfied, compensate you handsomely. I know how much of your valuable time I've imposed upon with my untimely and unwished for return."

"Drama," Will scowled, nodding as he stormed towards the garage where the Bentley was parked. "How could I forget? That's all you are is inane, foolish drama. Totally obnoxious…"

"Is that so? It's so nice to have things in common, isn't it Will?"

Will paused, trying to get the right key for this particular door, the embarrassing thing being, he didn't even have many keys on the ring he was flipping and swiping through, almost dropping them all on the hot pavement. The sun seemed unusually hot on the back of his neck.

"I'm muttering under my breath, smartass," he griped. "You're not supposed to answer me. How did you even *hear* me?"

"I have uncommonly excellent hearing for my age." Hannibal stood there with his hands hooked into his pockets, gracefully offended, with the obvious strength of a panther who might strike at any moment, but chose not to.

"*I have uncommonly excellent hearing for my age,*" Will mimicked, doing a piss-poor Lithuanian accent but nailing the egotistical tone.

"Do you need help finding your key, Will?"

Will wanted to scream, but instead he fished out the proper key at long last and stabbed it into the lock, twisted and gestured for Hannibal to enter with a sarcastic flourish of his hand.

"After you," he beckoned, nothing but the tremble of his fingers on the open door to suggest anything awry in his emotions.

The garage was dark inside, but instead of flicking the lights on, he immediately turned around, grabbing Hannibal by the shirt front so hard that the first button on the vest fell off. He fisted the soft, perfect fabric, savoring the gasp Hannibal let out and how the sudden move, unpremeditated and baffling even to himself, made his ex stop short in the middle of his next pretentious remark.

His fingers were tucked possessively under the low dip of Hannibal's undone collar, yanking until one of those buttons flew off as well. He raised his eyebrows, barely able to see Hannibal's sculpted features in the dark, and waited.

Hannibal growled and yanked Will flush against him so they were body to body, firm muscle colliding, immediately writhing together, even before the older man's hot, demanding lips claimed his own.

Aside from the two of them it was quiet and still, and everything in the garage echoed, so their moans and muttered curses were amplified, making their hands travel faster, feeling, caressing, remembering, kiss building on kiss until Will's wild, frantic affections made Hannibal break, just as he used to. He took over entirely, holding Will's face firmly in both hands and slowing down the kiss, swiping his tongue gently against Will's with a teasing stroke, followed by several more kisses so deep and wet that the younger man forgot how to breathe. His hands were planted on the front of Hannibal, and his ex grabbed his waist, another teasing grind to remind them both they were quickly getting hard, but they were taking it slow because that was the pace Hannibal had set and Will would do what Hannibal wanted.

*Anything* Hannibal wanted.

Will's life, his happiness, his chance to taste true love again, Hannibal could have it all and take it all away, if Will could only have this one moment. Time collapsed in on itself and he was eighteen, learning how to french kiss and getting too excited, trying to go too fast, his hands flying over Hannibal's clothes, untucking, his fingers roving under the back of Hannibal's shirt and feeling his warm skin, wanting to etch his own name all over him with a thousand kisses that hit Will back, each and every one, like a separate knife with Hannibal's name on it.

In the blur, they seemed to end up backed against the Bentley, Hannibal pulling Will's hair and nibbling his neck, licking him, his heartbeat solidly real and desperate against Will's when their mouths met again; Hannibal picked him up like he hadn't grown at all and sat him on the car. Will wrapped his legs around him and dragged him in fast for another kiss before they had time to think, drinking each other down like shot after shot of the strongest liquor.

He moaned loudly and put his head back to let Hannibal kiss his neck some more, the older man's hands all over his sensitive places, thumbing at a hard nipple, then smoothing down his back to lift him by the ass with an owning grope. Their tongues lashed together, Hannibal's patient exploration circling the drain, falling down, down.

Will might have let himself be taken against the Bentley right then and there, except that Hannibal's demanding hands, big and strong and everything he wanted and dreamed of each

lonely night, they landed on his hips again, and instead of merely grasping, they slipped under his jeans to touch his bare skin.

It wasn't that Hannibal was being any more forward in his lust than Will, who had not only started all this, but also had historically been the more needy and vocal and impatient lover, the one who started undressing first, moaned for more until he got what he wanted and was properly spoiled. He remembered being a pampered, besotted brat sometimes, teasing Hannibal and making him so crazy he'd fuck Will anywhere, kitchen tables and t.v. dens and classrooms, outside fucking like animals where anyone could catch them, under someone else's soft cotton sheets in a stolen-for-the-night bed that creaked nearly to breaking with the force of Hannibal's thrusts.

The problem was that despite all the reasons he wanted to keep going, that particular, obsessive caress of Hannibal's big fingers on his right hip made him remember the reasons he couldn't let this go on another second.

He didn't want Hannibal to know he still had the tattoo. Even considering this reveal made him feel so embarrassed and stupid that it broke him out of his lust-addled haze and made him shove Hannibal back with a gasp, the kind of broken, anguished noise he might make if someone suddenly broke a glass over his head or took out his knee with a baseball bat.

"What is it?" Hannibal clasped his face again and searched it tenderly, gazing at him in the shadowy room. "Will. What's wrong, did I hurt you?"

Will's chin wobbled and he felt like an idiot kid all over again. *Don't pretend you haven't always loved hurting me, Hannibal.*

He hopped off the car and strode with vicious desperation for escape to the chest of drawers against the opposite wall where he kept his client's keys in neat little separate cubbies. Then he tossed the Bentley keys to Hannibal and said sharply, "This never happened."

"*Will,*" Hannibal attempted, his voice a rasp after all the rough kisses. "Wait."

"Don't bother trying to pay me. If you write me a check, I'll rip it up."

The tears had already burst from Will's eyes and cascaded down his cheeks, still resonating with the feeling of Hannibal's fingertips caressing him like the most precious treasure. But he tried to keep them out of his voice, not sure if he succeeded, too afraid to look back and check -- he knew what would happen then, and what would happen when Christmas was over and Hannibal remembered to forget him, went back to his big important city life where Will could never fit in. Will was just something for him to do, right? A little fringe benefit of his holiday trip. Well, *not this time*.

"But–- Please don't go --" Hannibal stood open-mouthed and stared in disbelief as the younger man stormed back out of his own shop and slammed the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

**Next time:** What was going on in the head of 1993 Hannibal when he found himself falling for the boy he thought he could never have? What happened when Hannibal and Will got to know each other better? We'll find out.

# Drowning in my autocratic ways

Chapter Notes

> Hello dear readers! I've got two more chapters to share. I only have to edit the next so it will be up tonight or tomorrow. This one's pretty angsty and I like to follow that up with -- *more angst*, ok you caught me, but I think the next bit of angst is more satisfying? 😇
>
> cw: self-harm, brief references to child abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Hannibal. Then.**

There are some magical, special people in life capable of making it bearable even in hard times. People full of light who share it generously from the kindness of their heart in a way that never feels forced or unnatural or self-serving.

Mischa was a person like that. Hannibal felt her loss every day. The hole in his heart left by the death of his sister nineteen years ago never healed, therapists, drugs, alcohol, affairs and overworking be damned – he had tried it all. His grief for his lost family grew and grew, festering inside him like an infection. It made him sick. He still had days like this; he supposed he always would.

Uncle Robertus was *not* the sort of person who went out of his way to care for others, to notice when they were feeling down, especially on themselves, and lift them up, take their mind off their troubles, even find ways to restore their injured self regard. He was the polar opposite.

Robertus couldn't let his nephew breathe in the same town with him, unless he was criticizing every minute supposed error or embarrassing blunder Hannibal made, never letting Hannibal think for one second he was worthy of being a member of this elite and dignified family and its heritage. Reminding Hannibal every day how much of a disappointment he was – never mind the medical degree (wasted money; as a member of Lithuanian nobility, Hannibal ought to have entered into the family business affairs of real estate empire-growing and fake smiling interviews with the press, charity function after charity function with flashing cameras).

Never mind his sterling performance in his internship and residency at Johns Hopkins, what was Hannibal doing with his personal life? He should marry, a nice, sensible Lithuanian girl with the right values who could help Hannibal maintain a semblance of organization in his life. A *rich, noble* Lithuanian girl, Robertus need hardly add.

"I'm not going to marry Magde Laimutiene, Uncle," he sighed in exasperation on the evening he returned from Anger Management to find Robertus waiting for him with another lecture.

“The fact that we’ve despised each other since we were both in training pants should be reason enough.”

Hannibal made himself a drink without any invitation from Robertus to do so; he simply clunked a few ice cubes from the jar on the desk into a crystal tumbler and then poured a liberal amount of excellent vodka into the chilled glass.

“Magde’s changed a lot since then,” Robertus insisted. “Look here. She’s grown up beautiful and wise. The press adores her and wants to see her a countess. She would be a fine addition to our family and give you strong heirs.”

He put a newspaper down next to Hannibal where the nephew hovered at his big mahogany desk. It was folded over to the society news in their native tongue; so, it was an imported Lithuanian newspaper. There was no escape from his uncle’s matchmaking, even so many miles from home.

“Oh? Would she?” Hannibal examined the picture of Magde posing with her fellow debutantes at a recent fancy dress ball. He tilted it to one side and squinted quizzically. “I’m sorry, Uncle, but those just don’t look like child-bearing hips.”

“Did I say you could make yourself a drink in my office after your behavior today? Insult to injury, and now compounded by your infernal stubbornness regarding the need for you to marry, *post-haste.”*

Hannibal smiled, very coldly. “Do you have any limes? It could use a citrus twist.”

Robertus glared. In his sleek black silk dressing gown and crimson pajamas, his designer loafer slippers, with his steel-grey-strewn hair slicked back from his high forehead, he was the most imposing man who had ever worn pajamas. He resembled Hannibal’s own father; he resembled Hannibal.

Hannibal resented the man’s prominent brow bone, light eyelashes and chiseled cheekbones, his broad but slim build like looking in some haunted mirror to his worst nightmare of a future self, or seeing an alternate universe version of the cold, distant father he had nonetheless loved in his own, baffled, childish way. Not everyone was so easy to love as Mischa. Not everyone loved as easily as Mischa.

Until tonight, until that damnable Anger Management meeting and the beautiful boy darting half barefoot across the hot grass under a seeping Louisiana moon that promised pure trouble, Hannibal believed he would never see anyone lovable again, and he’d been fine with that. Now, he felt distinctly not fine. He did not appreciate his uncle further ruining what was already a foul mood and a disappointing evening made more so by the flicker of false hope, before he knew the boy’s age…and that he must never touch him. Never could.

Robertus won the staring contest.

His nephew shrugged, swigged his drink. “Is that all?”

He made to leave the room, taking the expensive bottle of liquor with him to waste the night away in his melancholy room.

“Give that here!” Robertus snatched the bottle back; Hannibal laughed and finished his drink in one long sip. “No, that is not all. You are out of control.”

“I’m twenty-seven years old, Uncle. I can be out of control if I want to. You have no say–”

“Don’t I, when it’s my resources you squander? Did you think I enjoyed paying your bail today and for the absurd anger management classes which I am quite sure you did not heed in the slightest. And did you think I wouldn’t hear about the gambling debts you accrued in medical school? I know you used money from the family trust to pay off your shameful and costly mistakes and shield your person from the attacks of loathsome mobster grunts.”

“You don’t know anything about it,” Hannibal insisted coldly. He rashly grabbed another handful of ice, an uncharacteristically uncouth move done specifically to annoy Robertus.

Truth be told, Hannibal was his father’s son and his uncle’s nephew down to his taste in the best which high fashion and good, luxurious living had to offer. They were all fond of their creature comforts and padding their lofty egos. It was his security blanket as well, a form of familiar defensive comfort. A kneejerk inheritance, to be the fine, strong, noble Lecter man dressed in a flawless suit, easily warning everyone else with his mere presence to either respect and adore him or keep their distance. Possibly both, very possibly, on many occasions. He hated being alike to Robertus. There was no avoiding it but sometimes he did try.

And Robertus didn’t know anything about the bizarre gambling addiction which had descended upon Hannibal amidst the hell of medical school exams.

He worked so hard and pulled so many all-nighters as to catapult himself to the top of a class he probably would have ruled anyway with a regular amount of effort and the preservation of his health, especially psychological, what was left of it. Instead, he had forced himself in a cloud of perfectionism to rain thunder and lighting and hail down on all potential rivals and impress every high-ranking surgeon at Johns Hopkins, every professor, *show them all.*

Handsome, popular, roguishly smooth Hannibal slept with every pretty fellow resident, broke all their hearts, felt nothing, repeated the process like the rinse and repeat of the drinks, the pills, the lines at exclusive parties on shining mirrors before decadent threesomes and blurred moans of insincere ecstasy, a shallow high desperately keening into the desire to truly feel *anything* other than fear, grief, self-hatred and rage. Anything. He would have taken friendship, lust, excitement in misadventures and depravity, the ego rush of his astronomical success in academics and medicine. Nothing came.

Gambling had come along by chance one evening at another boring party full of chances for excess. He’d tried everything else on offer, and this was something new. It turned out to be a blunder.

The men and women who ran the gambling ring were indeed organized crime, and they fixed the game so that their victims had a long winning streak followed by catastrophic plummets

that kept them mired in debt. Their goal was to squeeze dry the resources of wealthy families who sent their children to expensive and elite colleges, and it worked. It even worked on Hannibal, leaving him feeling terribly common, right back to the drawing board of nothingness within and without.

He was a barren labyrinth of false hopes and empty spaces where expectations of love once lived. Even if he ever could definitively impress or avenge himself on Robertus, would he feel that? Would it matter?

He was twenty-seven and felt older than his middle-aged uncle, older than his father who had been Robertus' senior by six years. *Old.* Worn out. A shell seeking more golden extravagance, more fleeting flings and gleaming successes to gild the hard but delicate exterior of his defenses to getting even more hurt by opening the shell. Ever. No, never. In Baltimore, his extravagant confidence and daring earned him admiration and fear; he was the ruler of all he surveyed, even at his lowest, intimidating, strong. Here he felt too much like that frightened boy who had come into Robertus' guardianship yearning for parental care, only to be treated cruelly. This feeling he could not endure.

"You don't know anything about me," he bit out, pouring enough vodka to almost spill over the top of the thick rim on the perfect sparkling goblet. The drink coursed down his throat like the worst kind of medicine, immediately blurring and blotting the bloody ink of his heart's wound with the promise of waking up sick.

"I know you're carrying on like an alcoholic at present. I know that you claim to be the valedictorian and top resident of your class–"

"I *am,*" Hannibal snapped.

He slammed the drink down on the table, refusing to continue imbibing if his uncle was going to call him an addict. In truth, substances that could be abused never stuck to him in that way. Drinking or taking drugs, they were choices. He could take or leave them voluntarily, with his body caring little either way.

Vodka splashed on the exquisitely shiny surface of the antique desk. Robertus snarled and whipped out the handkerchief from his robe's chest pocket to clean up the mess before it stained the finish.

"I am the highest ranking resident at Johns Hopkins and I am joining the surgical team there in the fall. I will be holding hearts in my own two hands to save lives while you sit here counting stacks of fool's gold. What claim do you have to such a sterling character, Uncle? Merely your birthright? I've gone beyond that. I will change the world for the better despite your attempts to hold me back."

"Hold you back?" Robertus scoffed, unaffected by the blaze in his nephew's eyes or the strained rasp of his voice which spoke of more hurt feelings than anger.

"I have sought to elevate you from the mistakes you made by abandoning your rightful place in this world, then humiliating our noble family time and time again – the drink, the drugs, the affairs, the money you've wasted on cars you've wrecked and –"

“I never wrecked the cars,” Hannibal smirked. “I let friends borrow them and *they* got into accidents with them. There was, at one point, an underground racing scheme–”

“You unforgivable embarrassment,” Robertus hissed. Red-faced, he slapped Hannibal’s cheek hard with the back of his hand, his knuckles connecting with his nephew’s golden skin and leaving a red bubble of blood over a fresh cut and a blossoming bruise. “You’re a disgrace to this family! I don’t want to hear any more of your smug bragging about balancing your supposed goals of 'saving the world from heart disease' with a hobby in various criminal exploits! I know you only do it to hurt us! And to hurt your sainted parents and sis–”

Hannibal was already finding it hard to hold back tears from the searing pain in his face. Only his pride had him remain silent even when the blow hit, so that the only sound in that moment was the heavy thudding smack of the hit to his cheek. His eyes flared, scarlet-tinged and immense enough with pain to frighten or gain sympathy from most others, again -- perhaps both. But not for Robertus.

“Keep their names from your filthy mouth,” Hannibal growled.

He grabbed the glass from the desk, threw it at the wall with all his strength and watched with grim satisfaction as it left an enormous puddle on the gorgeous blue wallpaper. Hunks of dangerously sharp crystal flew everywhere, one of them nearly colliding with his Uncle’s face until the man jumped back, consternation never blunting his instincts.

Hannibal licked his lip, finding it bloody. A smaller fragment of glass had hit his mouth without him noticing until now. He said nothing more, but turned quickly and stormed out, ran up the stairs two at a time like an unruly teenager. He knew that he’d fallen in love with an unruly teenager that night at first sight and there was nothing he could ever do about it. He knew he was cursed. A dangerous curse to everyone around him.

“This isn’t over, Hannibal!” Robertus called, voice clear as the crystal Hannibal had shattered.

How he wished he could shatter his uncle’s spine or crush his face in with his own bare hand and every considerable ounce of strength in his fit and well-muscled body, how he wished he didn’t care about being able to say he had a family and a home. He was only at the chateau for the summer because Robertus had threatened to forever revoke his financial support if Hannibal did not work in the family business for several months under his personal supervision to make back part of the funds he’d squandered.

The situation was temporary. He was currently poor, this was true; the gambling had been a costly error. But he had survived it with both knees intact, and --

Hannibal would soon be making a fortune working at the hospital performing delicate and challenging surgeries with which few were trusted. He had been lucky in that his supervisors had turned a blind eye to his nocturnal shenanigans.

Only one advisor, the clever and kind Dr. Fielding, had warned Hannibal: “*I don’t know a single truly brilliant doctor who wasn’t a daredevil in med school, Hannibal, but once you start work here in the autumn you’ll have to leave the party life and the stunts behind. Chief*

*of Staff will dismiss you without reference at the first threat you make to the reputation and integrity of his hospital, much less the chance of a lawsuit from you performing a surgery hungover or injured. Become the man your grades and your immense skills, your obvious real integrity tell us you are, the man we've put our faith in. Come September, that transformation must be complete. Hey?*"

Hannibal had nodded, had expressed his gratitude for the sage advice. He knew he did have to reel in his wildness, had to focus himself on *calming down,* embodying a new, mature Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

Keeping his head high and following the high road was the only real way to defeat Robertus. Hannibal walked speedily down the hall to his room, flicking his shirt buttons open as he went, then flung his door open, giving it a hearty slam behind him. He walked into the dark and wished it would consume him.

Sitting down on the bed with a sigh, he looked out the open window into the balmy night with its huge-looking full moon and a suspended canopy of diamond-bright stars. Was Mischa out there among them and was she broken-hearted or ashamed of him, if she could see his outrageous pendulum dives from glory to shame?

The boy's face came back to haunt him out of nowhere, like a vicious punishment, another gut punch from a cruel god or a nefarious fate. *Will Graham.* Will's eyes, clear sapphire shaded and sparkling brighter than those stars could ever even aspire to, his face so beautiful Hannibal thought he was a dream at first. It wasn't only Will's loveliness, his handsome young face or his sexy, slim body, his pretty hands, the vague grass stains on his knees, the skin creamy and supple, the rips in the sides of his shirt as if he'd jumped a few fences to get there. It was the innocent naivete and total lack of understanding as to his own gorgeousness, combined with the devastating shine of warm, kind, cleverness about him, it was *everything.*

He supposed that if he himself had a heart left to break…meeting Will that night would have done it.

As it was, this sort of thing was to be expected: not to see someone so amazing, but certainly that anything he pined for would remain untouchable. Safe from the curse of knowing him intimately and being burned in the firestorm of his miserable, shameful tirade against the universe.

Slipping his shirt and shorts off, he kicked his sandals to the far corner of his room, sat on the bed and swiped a hand over his face, finding his cheeks wet with more than blood by now, since it was safe to let the tears out when he was alone. His face and lip throbbed with cathartic pain but he craved more. If only he could make all of his exterior shell and even his own physical sensations match the pain inside him, even temporarily.

It wasn't suicidal, the cutting. He leaned over and pulled a small storage case from under the bed, heavy and metal, a lockbox such as people kept their precious id's and confidential documents in. It was just a way to match for a little while, to make the pain he felt inside come out in equal proportions. He couldn't stand it sometimes, only to suffer within. Holding it in. Mischa would be so disappointed in him if he took his own life, and then, what if there was a God and He adhered to the old-fashioned notion that suicide was grounds for explusion

to Hell with all the other dark angel disappointments? He'd never see his sister again if that happened.

Instead, he satisfied his screaming soul with the quiet that came with a few expert flickings of a small blade against his upper thighs, where there was no risk of bleeding out. His golden, smooth, sculpted physique looked so flawless except for the thin, pink lines of scars which this habit had left behind for several years. Occasionally a lover would see it and ask questions; quickly he would turn the lovemaking harder and harsher to shut them up, and it always tended to make them forget or – forget to care. He was gone from their life soon enough, anyway, but he couldn't have news of his masochistic hobby filtering back to the hospital.

No one could know, except for him and perhaps Mischa, although he hoped she only saw him in the rare moments of his success and turned from him in times like this. He had the darkness and the dim shine of silver in his clenched fist, the beautiful, slender rupture of tender flesh and a slow, harmless wet spill of red against gold, providing him greater release than anything sexual ever had.

As usual, the cleaning of his wounds provided a welcome second gush of pain. He bandaged himself with the simple but effective implements he kept neatly stored in the lockbox. Alone in the shadows, sniffling with tears and blood, he placed all of the materials back where they belonged and slid the heavy small box under the bed.

He went to the adjoining bathroom and splashed his face with cool water, slicking it through his hair, which had stuck to his brow with combined sweat and crusted blood. He ought to take a shower; he was disgusting. But he didn't have the strength. The alarm would go off early. He must be in the car to go to the Angel Wood office with Robertus first thing, and so he would take a long shower first, then go downstairs with a huge, smug smirk that said he was just fine.

The work day would be obnoxiously boring and the night beyond it seemed a yawning ravine. Perhaps he would go to the local bars and find himself another one night stand. He wanted to bury himself in something soft and sweet and pleasurable.

Someone as deplorable and destructive as him should be kept far away from Will Graham, so innocent, (so soft, sweet, pleasurable, tempting, forbidden, even more tempting), inflicting more self-blame and a throb of pain to his head that contrasted with the slow wakening hardness beneath the sheets he'd flung himself into.

Even Dr. Hannibal Lecter, who he would make himself into soon enough, was too sullied with past sins, too cynical to be anywhere near such a luscious, untouched nymph, fragile with that reciprocating lust glowing from his eyes that had been all over Hannibal. Will looked like he wanted to be slammed against that tree they had spoken next to and kissed until he fainted by Hannibal; he looked as if he wanted Hannibal to lay him down in the warm summer grass and do things to him that Will didn't even know or understand but ached to taste with the touch of a mature and knowing lover. Someone mysterious from far away, a poetic soul with a darkness that beguiled him. How Hannibal wished it could be that easy.

He moaned; the pain always made him aroused afterwards, and the nocturnal self-pleasuring was his usual follow-up to the cutting, a way to put himself to a solid sleep that would take him to morning with no further disturbance from Thoughts.

His hand snaked automatically down to wrap around his aching cock, already growing huge with every cascading memory of Will Graham, his beauty, his innocence, his adorable wit and flirtation, his *curiosity,* the sensuous sound of his endearing voice with that slow, sweet accent. There wasn't a pore, a nerve ending, a subconscious or conscious fragment, a single molecule of his being which did not feel drowned in desire for Will. One meeting shouldn't leave him like this, but he stroked himself off almost efficiently, hoping it would solve the inappropriate yearning that he "got it out of his system." He gripped his weeping dick which was slick enough with precum to make it easy, and he even let his mind stray to picturing a night with Will spent in every shade of daring, sinful satisfaction.

When he came with a shuddering gasp, it was much harder than usual, a shock to his system, the orgasm actually seeming stronger than it should possibly be, and Will's name came from his lips in a startled whisper. Doing this had not gotten Will out of his system, but only deepened the longing, the desire to be close to Will and hold his precious, cute, irresistible body close, dance with him and take him out to lovely dinners and shower him with gifts, fuck him each night with long, slow, deep strokes while holding him down and telling him emphatically he was perfect and deserved the world.

He could only hope that the ill-advised fantasy would cease come morning and that his waking reality would be free from thoughts of unachievable bliss, such happiness as he could never deserve. Deep down, he believed his uncle was right about him in every word. It had been ingrained in him over the years by constant repetition of his unworthiness, so that his pride remained a thin guard against letting the feeling show. The Lecter pride was all that protected him from the only other living Lecter male: there had to be a joke in there somewhere.

Hannibal lost the thread of his worries to a sultry dream of slow dancing with Will in a bar where they were all alone and sad, romantic songs played all night until they started kissing, still swaying in each other's arms, and Will said in that vulnerable little way he had spoken to Hannibal earlier, "Oh. I love you. I love you, Hannibal…"

Morning came too soon.

Chapter End Notes

Next: oh God -- *such* a long young Will chapter 😂 He's going through it trying to understand his blossoming feelings for Hannibal while painfully reminded they can't get together. Can Will give up so easily, though? Can Hannibal resist this irresistible boy? And of course -- we'll then catch up with the present tense (mis)adventures. 🖤

# The night's in a paper cup when you want it to last

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Will. Then.**

*"You, you look like freedom, you, you look like change. You look like the avalanche in me.*" - Heather Nova

***

"I'm just sayin', all this time you've been tellin' me there ain't no point in fallin' for a rich, elegant, fancy-schmancy girl who never gives me the time of day," Charlie smirked into her extra extra iced coffee as she, Will and Grady walked to school in their usual reluctant, gradual way. "Here you are head over heels at first damn sight to essentially her brother, who's in his goddamn late twenties and even more out of your league than Chiyoh is out of mine."

"And?" Will rolled his eyes and glowered, taking a long sip of his own overly sweet morning wake-up call in a styrofoam cup full of crushed ice; Bess's coffee on Main Street was cheap, strong and good. Somewhere along the line he and his two friends had heard that ordering coffee "extra extra" (extra cream and sugar) was "cool and hip."

They were meandering up the sidewalk from Main Street to School Street, yes, School Street, to Will's cringing annoyance. Did everything about this town have to be so picket fence cutesy? The answer, unfortunately, was yes. The elementary and middle schools were on Learning Street, for crying out loud.

He'd love to move somewhere *awesome*, edgy and amazing, full of mystery, new opportunities and adventures, beauty and unpredictability. Where the streets…had no names! Just like Bono said.

Will was pretty sure the streets had names in Baltimore, though, especially for a wealthy and affluent young man like Hannibal Lecter who probably had a penthouse on the richest street. He chewed his lip, cold with coffee and sugar, contemplating the matter, phased out of his friends' ongoing conversation by his complete obliviousness.

"He ain't even listenin', Charles, rest your voice," Grady said amusedly. "Save your cruel but kind wisdom for a more fortuitous – youch!"

Grady had walked right into the elbow Will suddenly thrust out into his chest in a widescreen, all-consuming panic.

"Oh, is that him?" Grady recovered quickly while Will remained standing stock still on the sidewalk where they were about to cross over to Angel Wood High.

The sun was absolutely *baking* the sidewalk, Will could feel the hot cement like a threat under the worn soles of his sandals, and everything seemed suddenly heightened: the rivulet of sweat sliding from Will's forehead down his cheek, the sounds of all the other teenagers walking to school or clambering off the bus, cacophonies of various hit songs being blasted from boomboxes hoisted on shoulders, country versus hiphop versus pop, the molten heat of a sun that wasn't quite *this* inflaming mere moments before Will's lucid blue gaze flitted casually across the street to the left, where a black Rolls Royce had pulled up to that fancy schmancy real estate office.

It was the agency responsible for selling all the grandest homes in town, so of course Robertus Lecter had business with them. Lecter was known for his extensive worldwide real estate holdings and growing his already large fortune off the backs of countless businesses and home owners. He was not known for being a fair and kind landlord.

He also didn't *look* very kind, already looming like a shadow over a bright, fresh early summer morning so close to the end of school and the beginning of the rest of Will's life. Robertus looked like a mean vulture, but despite the obvious cruelty etched on his face, he also resembled his nephew. Will's stomach clenched, the coffee seeming like a bad idea mixed with the swirling butterflies in there, a storm of nerves controlled only by Hannibal.

Hannibal followed his uncle out of the car. Robertus was lecturing him; Will didn't have to be any closer than this to guess that. Far out of earshot, anyone would tell the older man viewed his nephew with disdain verging on dislike. Hannibal looked miserably bored, his sunglasses covering coffee brown eyes Will wanted to see again.

He stood in front of the office while his uncle rambled on about whatever looking quite stern. Will got the impression Hannibal hadn't packed much of the right kind of clothes for a Louisiana summer. Maybe in Baltimore you could still be wearing a sweater vest in June, but it had to feel like a straightjacket in this weather. Still, it sure looked good.

Will's mouth watered, lips chilled from the drink soon turning warm again, and he stared. Hannibal was so effortlessly perfect. He was an impossibility of manly beauty. Everything he did seemed tossed absent-minded into the universe, immediately beautifying what once seemed cardboard and banal. His presence was enormous. Will wasn't the only one who stopped and sealed his gaze to the mysterious newcomer in town.

"That's definitely him," Charlie noted. She chewed a mouthful of crushed ice, considering the young man at whom Will was staring. "He's alright, for a dude. You gonna go talk to him?"

Hannibal was wearing a tight-fitting white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show off bulging, tanned biceps. A beige sweater vest and a leather cuff bracelet with two buckles, the dark bronze shimmering in the sunlight. A necklace on a leather strand, dangling with a charm Will couldn't make out from this distance. He had floppy, tousled hair in accordance with the emerging grunge trend, yet his clothing was a strangely effective collision of rocker cool with ineffable preppy. The leather added edge to the vest and his fitted khakis, rolled up to his ankles, strong and smooth like the rest of him, even the stylish but laid back Birkenstock shoes he wore happening to be the same type Will had been unsuccessfully trying to save up for for months.

“Jesus, Mary. Joseph, all the saints, cherubim and seraphim,” drawled a tall blonde girl who had also stopped to eye the new guy in town. She was a Senior, too, and her parents had done her the intriguing cruelty of naming her Delta Dawn after the Tanya Tucker song.

Delta Dawn slid her teal-framed sunglasses down her nose and sighed. Her next words eloquently captured the mood of the spell which Hannibal had cast over the town. “I would trade five years off the enda my life to have that man fuck me.”

“Hey,” Will groused, turning on Delta with unusual– for him – confronting disapproval. “Don’t objectify him like that.”

“Oh, like you were thinking anything different?” Charlie’s eyebrows shot up so far they seemed likely to collide with the brim of her bucket hat. She crossed her long brown arms, the coffee cup dangling from one hand as Will sighed in aggravation.

“That’s different,” he whispered emphatically.

“I do what I want, sugar,” Delta cooed. She put her sunglasses back on and popped her gum, then crossed over towards school wiggling her pert ass in the bright teal minidress that was probably gonna land her in the principal’s office for indecent apparel.

Suddenly, though, Will was envious of Delta Dawn Fisher and her perfectly naughty wardrobe purchased on daddy’s credit cards to keep her on the cutting edge of every new trend. Her boobs were always sort of squashed together in that way that looked sexy, held by a wonder bra inside the scoop neckline of another lycra number, and her hair was always sort of feathery around her cute, heart-shaped face.

Will didn’t know how to dress “sexy.” How would he capture the attention of an unavailable, inappropriate older guy again at this rate? Like most of the other guys out here, he wore a t-shirt with the sleeves cut off due to the heat – this one a plain banana yellow, and a pair of shorts, these ones light black jeans that had also been shorn with scissors, strands of cloth tapping his lower thighs when he walked.

If Hannibal ever did lapse and have an affair with anyone from Angel Wood Class of ‘93 it sure as shit wasn’t likely to be Will’s confused aesthetic sheepish deer-in-headlights ass self, he gloomily considered. The Hannibals in the world were meant for the Delta Dawns of the world, and there wasn’t a damn thing–

“I said are you gonna go over there and say hi?” Charlie repeated, annoyed. “Or just gawk at him until we all get tardies?”

“Naw, c’mon, let’s just go,” Will sighed, “It’s hopeless.”

“Really?” Grady said incredulously. “Hopeless romantic Will Graham thinks his first substantial mature crush is a hopeless prospect? Tsk, tsk. You’ll be eighteen in a month, just wait it out and make a move why don’t ya?”

“Oh sure, I’ll just wait until my birthday and throw myself at him like a whore,” Will grumbled. They followed the next cloud-like assortment of teens and embarked over the

crosswalk.

“It’s one more week of high school, man, you’ll get through it,” Grady encouraged, patting Will’s tensed back sympathetically.

“He ain’t gonna relax until that man kisses him, and that means he may never relax again,” Charlie pointed out archly. She adjusted the strap on her jean overall shorts which had gotten tangled with her backpack strap.

They had arrived in front of the bland brick school’s main entrance beside the large bike rack. It was a day like any other save for the fact that there were only four more of these till graduation and the fact that Will was in love.

He glanced over at Hannibal one more time in a sort of wistful “goodbye” to this unspoken and unrequited staring session, only to find that the object of his obsession had disappeared into the office with his uncle. His heart sank.

Then suddenly, the door of the realtor’s place opened and Hannibal came back out, opening the door of his uncle’s car where it was parked right in front like Robertus owned the place ‘cause he probably did. Hannibal grabbed an official looking file folder from the backseat as if he’d forgotten to bring it to their meeting.

He put his sunglasses on top of his head and took out a cigarette, stealing a quick smoke while his uncle waited for him to return. With his back pressed to the wall of the building, the cigarette perched between two fingers, his expression inscrutable, Hannibal looked like he was waiting for the modeling shoot photographer to start snapping pictures of him for a glamorous ad campaign.

His bored, above it all expression faded when he finally caught Will’s eyes. A soft smile quirked his lips and he nodded familiarly at Will.

Will’s mouth formed the word “hi” but no sound came out; his mind was wheezing in disbelief at this attention.

His little greeting seemed to charm Hannibal out of a pretty dire mood. The glamorous Lithuanian heir to a great fortune, who had gone to medical school anyway and become a surgeon, a hero. The talk of the town. This young man didn’t look at anyone else although he was himself the object of plentiful looking and gossiping from passer-bys young and old.

Hannibal kept his eyes on Will. And with the most gentle smirk, he mouthed back, “Hi,” and *– – – winked.*

Will’s heart staggered. A wild, overwhelming surge of erotic, pleasurable excitement took over his body, so potently he thought he might get hard; he was certainly dizzy. He got the absolute and undeniable impression that Hannibal was completely in control of him, achieving this quite as effortlessly as he did most other things.

“Did he just *wink* at you?” Grady asked, astounded. He dropped the school bag he had tossed onto one shoulder and it hit the ground with a low thud.

“I think he just winked,” Charlie put in, as if she had expected it, because nothing seemed to surprise her. “Laser focus on you, buddy. I think you might close that deal by September after all.”

Losing one’s virginity before going off to college was, after all, The Goal one talked about all senior year. The idea was to swipe your V card with someone who wouldn’t be going to the same college, so that you could cut ties and start fresh in the Fall but with a good working knowledge of how to have great sex. Since, of course, a fly by night affair that could never last carried with it an urgent passion that meant the sex probably *would* be amazing.

But Will didn’t know what to do with himself.

Hannibal had already moved on. He stubbed his cigarette out and politely put it in a nearby trash can, then tucked the folder under his arm and went into the office.

Will looked at the place where he had been as if it should now be marked a holy shrine. His curls were sticking to his forehead with sweat; his eyes were stinging with an odd glaze of highly aroused, petulantly longing tears that soon clung to his lashes, though he swallowed hard to keep from full-on crying.

“So he does remember you,” Grady noted. “Impressive. But that means he has good taste, huh? And that there’s hope for the rest of us.”

A geek like Will, Grady had no love life and was obviously leeching onto Will’s equally nonexistent one with vicarious soap opera watching enthusiasm.

“You do realize that’s Hannibal Lecter? I'm not getting my hopes up.” A lie. Will swiped a hand through unruly, moist curls and tugged the front of his shirt where it sealed to his hammering heartbeat.

They walked into school and followed the numb, pointless last week routine of locker, then the stroll to homeroom. Luckily, no bullies accosted them that morning. If anyone had interrupted Will from the high he was on after that semi-encounter with the man he was lusting for, he could have pulverized them and been held back from graduating for sure.

Nobody was gonna knock him off this particular cloud, but he was good at pretending to feel or believe less than he did. He didn’t want to act confident that Hannibal was still attracted despite the age, or that he was special to Hannibal, until he knew for sure.

*Confident? Ha, that’s a laugh. I could be riding him and still wonder if he thought I was cute or he was just being nice. He could crush me with one look and make me his moaning slave with a word.*

“Nothin’ wrong with havin’ top shelf taste, Will,” Charlie observed. “I do, too, let’s not forget but…don't let him treat you bad is all. Don’t get so carried away in your feelings that you forget you deserve the world.”

“Charlie Ann,” Will breathed in amused disbelief. He paused outside homeroom and laid an amazed hand on his heart. “As I live and breathe air. Did you just say something nice about

me?"

"You quit, dork," Charlie smirked. She whipped her hat off and stuck it atop his curls. "You know I hate my middle name."

"Wonders never cease," Grady shrugged with a yawn at the prospect of the day ahead.

Will followed them into homeroom, only to be scolded with a reminder there were no hats in the classroom.

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He made a huge deal to himself about the next Anger Management meeting. There were only two left and he had to make every single one count. This was the closest he could get to Hannibal with no rivals in sight. Nobody else at the meeting last time had seemed like a prospect to Hannibal, even the annoying lady who enjoyed the trust fall a little too much for Will's taste. No, Hannibal's attention had been firmly on Will even when he pretended otherwise (so Will liked to think, hoping it wasn't his imagination; but he couldn't forget Hannibal's look of inadvertent admiration that first night when they talked outside during the break, and he definitely never wanted to erase that look from across the street, that amusedly provoking, *I-know-you* look that had his hand down his sheets jerking hard and fast for the three nights that stood between him and that damn meeting).

Funny how now he was looking forward to the stupid meeting he didn't need to fix anger management issues he didn't have. Before Hannibal, this type of commitment would have been barely acceptable as a way to get out of the house and away from his loathsome so-called foster dad. He did that all the time, stayed busy under any excuse so he and Earl were ships passing in the night. Soon enough he'd be able to move out and then it wouldn't be a problem, but for now, it was. Still, now he looked forward to the meeting like it was a date with the most fascinating man on the planet. Maybe it was?

He giggled softly under his breath, getting ready in his room, patting some relatively nice aftershave onto his cheeks and adjusting his shirt several times until it looked a way he liked. Or thought Hannibal might like and be tempted by. The naughtiness of an attraction so forbidden made it even more intoxicating.

Will left the collar of his aqua polo shirt open just enough not to be ridiculously obvious, then checked out his ass by turning a few times in front of the mirror. The shorts were a bit of a risk. They were also the cutest ones he had, made of that athletic mesh sort of fabric, heather gray with aqua stripes on the sides that reasonably matched the shirt.

Cutest and shortest. They showed off quite a lot of his legs, which had hard, good-looking calves from working those muscles on boats all the time and curvy thighs, which were a gift from nature he didn't intend to waste.

He wasn't anywhere near as attractive as Hannibal, who was light years out of his league. But Hannibal had found him intriguing for a reason, which while entirely unsolvable to Will, did nonetheless mean it could happen again.

When it came to shoes, he had no choices aside from his beat-up Reeboks, a pair of work boots with mismatching laces and his woebegone sandals. He shrugged and stuck his feet in the latter before racing downstairs, throwing a hurried, “Going to a church meeting” at Earl on his way out.

Earl grunted and got back to his task of rolling multiple joints and making little bags of coke to sell in and around Angel Wood. That dim yellow light in the kitchen that he worked by always looked sickly, the movements of his foster dad’s fingers on the drugs deft and sure despite the fact he was high himself most of the time. Will knew he was almost free, so he just kept going, breathing in confidence, breathing out anxiety, wondering which would be controlling him when he got to the meeting.

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Will found that anger was his chief concern upon arriving at the anger management meeting. He was at cross damn purposes two seconds after walking up the sidewalk to the church. It was a sweltering night and he was glad he’d applied extra deodorant; the heat had merely enhanced the scent of his aftershave and he was congratulating himself on his own probably irresistible sexiness before the next impending self esteem crash inevitably sucked away his pride – when he saw Hannibal on the church lawn.

Talking to the stay at home mom with the white sundress and a purple cardigan over her shoulders like she couldn’t decide between tennis or golf. With the stupid shiny bob swinging around her vaguely attractive face while she gestured enthusiastically, then said something that made Hannibal *laugh.*

And Hannibal was wearing this *outfit* that short-circuited Will’s brain, a light blue button-up with a small pattern on it in navy, maybe they were little sailboats or something, and the shirt was half-unbuttoned, showing off the top of his chest, golden skin under dark curls, and then these dark blue cargo shorts with white espadrilles. Everything he wore was exquisitely fitted to his strong frame to just short of too tight, and it was perfect, Hannibal looked perfect. His adorable crooked white teeth flashed in the lazy, dimming light of a cloudy dusk when he grinned, gesturing about something with this elegance that hit Will with a sword stab to his heart.

Will turned red and felt stupid. He’d blown the whole crush out of proportion. Hannibal flirted with everyone who was even passably cute, that was the rumor around town, but Will tried not to listen because he wanted to stay feeling special. Now it was obviously true, and worse – it would be *legal* for him to sleep with that little tramp who was stealing him away from Will with her vapid chatter and availability. Everyone knew Linda Lee’s husband took frequent business trips (hence, affairs) and left her to her own devices. The cable guy had apparently left his truck in her driveway overnight one time and ignited gossip on the subject of “women’s lib” and “how dare she, a mother,” et cetera.

O.E.A. Preston appeared in the door and called, “okay, my angry friends, let’s head on in and get started. Tonight we’re gonna make a time capsule of anger to bury!”

Will would prefer to bury Linda Lee, especially since Hannibal said to her under his breath (audible as Will sulked closer, the night seeming drained of oxygen) “Oh, joy.” And she

laughed too loudly, like Will had laughed at his jokes.

Hannibal finally noticed, *remembered* Will's insubstantial existence when the boy stormed past him and Linda Lee with all the pride he could summon. Keeping the pride intact made his maturity slip away because it was just too much to handle at once. Hannibal's presence was too much to handle, still pulling him in like a goddamned magnet when he was trying to pull away and show off the fact that he didn't care who the man seduced for his latest summer fling.

"Will," Hannibal smiled, as if the boy wasn't speed-walking past him in clear escape mode. He broke away from Linda Lee while the woman was still waiting for him to answer her latest question, and his politely attentive expression had shifted to something more intrigued.

"Excuse me," he said to Linda Lee while chasing Will with such annoying ease.

Each of his easy, fluid strides seemed to be faster and stronger than Will trying to run a marathon.

Will had made it to the door and lingered there rolling his eyes. "What?"

"Hello," Hannibal smiled. "How are you doing?"

The smile destroyed Will's defenses like a wrecking ball striking a cardboard castle. This close, although the man maintained platonic and appropriate personal space, Will could see that his lower lip was dented with a small red line that looked to have begun as an angry spurt of blood. And there was a faded bruise on his cheek.

Angry? Jealous? Will just wanted to make Hannibal all better if someone hurt him, and he wanted to hurt whoever hurt him, even knowing this was probably a result of another foolish scuffle over an unavailable lust prospect. Another wrathful boyfriend lunging himself at Hannibal to prevent his mate being the next notch on the handsome Lecter youth's headboard. That didn't matter as much as healing any pain Hannibal ever felt. Why did that feel like Will's responsibility, or more so his calling?

"Terrible, but better than you, I guess. What all happened to your face?" His scowl had softened into a concerned look that made Hannibal look away quickly.

"My uncle did that," Hannibal admitted. He had been staring at the ground and let out a sharp breath before meeting Will's eyes with intensity. "I don't know why I told you that."

"You can tell me things. We're friends," Will shrugged. "I'm sorry. Seems like sometimes all our male guardians are good for is slappin' us around and makin' us feel inferior, huh?"

"You have a guardian who hurt you?" Hannibal snarled, flickering a wild lust in Will like he had set off an explosion, powerful desire roaring in Will that felt enough to knock him over.

"Goes with the territory, don't it?" Will laughed darkly. "Apart from the very first foster mom I had, who was the only person that treated me right and therefore got accused of being an unfit parent, I ain't had one yet who hasn't hurt me one way or the other, and Child Services

saved the best for last with my current so-called dad. *Earl.* They shine up when Services come to call, makes it seem like I cried wolf too many times to be believed. Come July, I'm fucking outta there, man. Like…Barry Allen gone. He can't keep me when I'm eighteen."

"If anyone ever harms you, or threatens you again, you're to come to me at once," Hannibal said with deliberate command, his body galvanized by more of that smoldering, barely contained violence that kept landing him in trouble and kept dazzling Will. "Understand?"

"Shouldn't be an issue," Will said with another casual shrug as some of the other "students" filed past them on their way down to the church basement. "Grady's uncle owns an apartment building on Juniper Street. We got us a sweet deal for the summer and ain't nothin' Earl can do but find himself a new victim to terrorize. I figure once I'm free of him I can report him as an adult, maybe at least the sheriff will keep an eye on that shady motherfucker, you know?"

Mr. Jennings from the general store stopped by them on his way in, thankfully after Will cursed, as this would have scandalized him. "I didn't forget, son," he smiled kindly, passing Will a pack of free candy as a thank you for the trust fall trickery from the first meeting.

"Oh," Will blushed, embarrassed to be out there getting a present of candy because it seemed childish. "Thank you, sir, no problem, anytime, see you in there."

Jennings nodded, oblivious to the teenager's desperate struggle, and went inside, so that there were only Will and Hannibal still procrastinating on making an entrance. Will stuffed the pack of Now and Laters into his shorts pocket, only to forget he didn't have one because he was wearing his dumb little would-be slut shorts, dammit…

The candy smacked to the top step and Hannibal leaned down to retrieve it. "Now and Laters?"

"It's, um, on account of they're hard on the outside and soft inside," Will explained. "Unlike me." He laughed, taking the pack from Hannibal and unwrapping the top. Unwrapping a purple one and offering Hannibal a green, he admitted, "I'm soft on the inside, soft on the outside."

"Don't look so regretful about that," Hannibal said with a sad smile, concern over Will's situation at home mingling now with a barely repressed interest in Will's phrasing. "I wish I could have kept some of my youthful ideals about me. Despite bad treatment, you've stayed soft, which in my view makes you strong. I built up so many walls that I can't even find my own way out of them sometimes."

He popped a green candy in his mouth. "Hmm. I expected lime."

"Naw, those are green apple. They're the best ones." His ears felt warm, alerting him that the tips were turning pink. He watched Hannibal's jaw working that candy and felt more than a little dizzy again.

The skies opened up as Hannibal's expression deepened and his lips parted with an unspoken sentiment that might have been a bad idea. Rain suddenly plummeted down like buckets of

water wielded by mean, morally driven angels. They went quickly indoors, Hannibal shielding Will lightly with a hand steering his back.

Hannibal's touch left a fire brand on Will's skin that seemed to tear right through the now wet fabric of his shirt and hit his soul like a brick through a windshield, knocking him off his track again. Without thinking, he turned when Hannibal was still close and muttered, his eyes raking desperately up and down the older man, "I want you."

Will's eyes were huge and he stood looking up at Hannibal, never having been this soft emotionally as the blood coursed through his body, making him hard where it counted. He swallowed past the hurt that it was to feel so much all at once, the collision of it all. The doubt he'd recover if he never felt Hannibal's kiss or was made subject to the hungry heated desperation of his sex.

"You think you do," Hannibal sighed shakily.

He let himself stay there, their bodies *almost* pressed together in the narrow space between the door and the back stairs. Just for a few more moments, he stayed close enough for Will to know the difference between the nervous sweat of his brow and the rain water dripping off both their clothes, a quiet drip-drop combining with the noise of the meeting downstairs, OEA Preston trying to corral the restless heathens who were his students into paying attention while he called roll and marked their attendance down.

Hannibal's hair looked darker like this, wet with rain, falling into his mysterious eyes. His body was warm and big, and Will wanted to be eclipsed. Will stepped closer and felt the two of them brush together, which immediately made him gasp, chemistry sizzling between them, he'd never been so turned on. That wasn't the reason for the gasp, though, it was pressing himself haphazardly against Hannibal's frame and finding that the older man was hard, too, *very* hard, and also gasping for air that only seemed available if they breathed it into each other's mouths.

He knew kissing Hannibal wouldn't feel anything like with Grady and Charlie, because those had been the tentative practice runs of ignorant children playing pretend, and this was very, very grown up and real and over his head. His curls were cold and dripping against his hot face and he licked his lips, reached for Hannibal's hand wanting to press it to his ass, finding instincts that amazed him. He knew nothing about sex and wanted everything about it so long as it was with Hannibal.

"Will, don't." Hannibal squeezed his eyes shut and stepped away from him, back hitting the wall. "Please. We can't. And if you're going to keep trying this, I can't be friends with you."

Embarrassed, Will bleated out nonsensically, "I *felt* it, Hannibal, I know what you were thinking of."

"You don't have any idea," Hannibal blazed down on him now, a sullen god, undulating in guilt and fear and bitterness that all seemed pointed at himself, not at Will, and it formed a great big warning to stay away from him. "I could hurt you, and I don't want to. It's the last thing I'd…" he gulped, "Ever want."

“It’s the only thing *I* want. C’mon, Doctor Lecter, aren’t you curious,” Will plunged on with not one thought in his head, only desire and these incomprehensible new fits of verbalizing it. “How I taste?”

“I said stop it,” Hannibal snapped.

He touched Will with firm but gentle moves, easy because again Will melted into his every wish almost before it happened, ready for anything the man wanted to do with him.

He turned their positions and put Will against the wall, using that simple, dominating steering that could easily have been broken out of, but served its purpose in too many ways. Then the big, strong hands fell off him and stern, conflicted amber eyes swallowed him whole.

“You think you know what you’re doing, showing up here in that sweet little outfit and propositioning me in a church, like I’m a sin you should be anywhere near.” Hannibal spoke quickly, vehemently, staring right into Will’s big blue eyes and refusing to let his gaze travel anywhere else. “I’m a mistake you shouldn’t make, Will, and I’m a downfall I won’t *let* you endure. I’m not a good influence, I’m not even stable. You deserve better, and even aside from that, it’s wrong. Wrong for me to let you get that close, and wrong for you to –”

“Want you to kiss me so hard right now and touch me everywhere?” Will whispered, posture open as a flower looking up at the sun. “I can’t help it. How can something so natural be wrong? Feels like we’re meant to–”

“It’s just attraction, it can deceive you, Will. At your age, everything seems larger than life. I’m nothing special, but you are. I’m the responsible party here even when you’re instigating, so I can only beg you to *stop instigating.* Or else we can’t ever know each other.”

“That’s bullshit,” Will trembled, “What happens if we meet again years later and there’s nothing morally wrong with us wanting this? Even then?”

Hannibal smiled sadly. “By then you’ll likely have found someone much more worthy of your affections, and I’d prefer you met them without the memory of me tarnishing your innocence, very possibly ruining you. How could I want to hurt someone so…” He shut his eyes and shook his head. “Will, I don’t think that we *can* know each other.”

“I’ll never wanna give myself to anyone else, Hannibal Lecter, and don’t you forget it,” Will said through tears that threatened to make an even bigger fool of him than body and words already had. “You can put me in a corner like a kid and tell me off, but it doesn’t change how I feel and nothin’ ever will. Mark my words.”

“We have to go down now.” A shield had come up over Hannibal’s features. Apparently, his accent got real thick when he was emotional, and that was the only part he couldn’t seem to help. Rigidly serious and forcibly remote he added, “If we aren’t marked present, we’ll have to repeat this meeting as it won’t count. I don’t want to be back here past the three required occasions, and like with other matters, you deserve better than such a waste of time.”

He turned and walked downstairs, not looking back, and walked right into the meeting. Will panted out some hectic breaths and thought he’d have a heart attack. He thought he’d die of

humiliated rejection and just from not tasting Hannibal's lips or getting more of that helplessly lustful touch. It wouldn't help anything to cry, and he had to soak up every second of Hannibal's presence that was available, especially since he'd gone and wrecked the golden prospect of friendship with hasty, idiotic fumblings and now those chances were dwindling fast.

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Making the anger time capsule would have been funny if things hadn't gotten so awkward between them. Thanks to his extremely bad timing of when to learn how to flirt or pursue someone romantically, Will was all alone, thinking about Hannibal's green apple candy flavored kiss and how his hands would have felt, hot with desire, cold with the kind of rain that broke a summer heat. He felt broken. Hannibal was ruining him alright, but through not taking him.

Pouting, he piled in the remnants of his 'rage,' tossing them heartlessly into the provided cardboard box. The slip from the vice principal's office requiring him to come to these meetings if he wanted to graduate. The words he'd had to write last time when they did a freewriting activity but thankfully didn't have to read aloud. He hadn't been able to think about anything but the gorgeous man he'd just met, and had filled the whole two pages with whimsical fantasies about being Hannibal Lecter's Boyfriend.

But Hannibal Lecter didn't *have* Boyfriends or Girlfriends. Charlie said she heard some of the twentysomething girls from the junior college complaining in the makeup aisle of Rebellious Rose that Hannibal was a notorious heartbreaker. Jenna Jean Givens had a cousin in Baltimore who went to med school with Hannibal and Jenna Jean *knew* things. Will's dreams of walking through town holding hands with the best looking man in the whole world, of them laughing and telling each other all their likes, loves, hates and aspirations, sharing meals and movies and concerts and making everyone else crazy jealous were silly and weak.

He grabbed the red pen from the box and wrote on his freewriting page, "*Hi my name is Will Graham, it's June of 1993 and I'm a silly weakling.*" He tossed the paper into the box and crammed the lid on, keeping that part of his history duly memorialized. Across from him in the circle of uncomfortable metal chairs, Hannibal was placing the ticket from the police station and his freewriting with all that calligraphy perfect cursive into the box, a cool and unconcerned look on his face. He had to feel Will's idiotic gaze but ignored it.

After the meeting, Will just about couldn't wait to get gone. Without saying goodbye to anyone, least of all his ex-friend Hannibal, he fled up the stairs and through the door into the night, down the wet grass, almost sliding when his flip flops hit the slick lawn.

He heard the others coming out more slowly, yawning and complaining about the dull meeting, noting that the rain had died off and cut the heat a bit, sounding relieved at that, stupid inane small talk that made Will think a good old fist fight or shouting match such as landed them all there in the first place would have pleased his ears more.

There was probably, somewhere, a rock he could hide under for the rest of his life as a result of saying "'*C'mon, don't you wanna know how I taste"*" or whatever, like he was Julia

Roberts in *Pretty Woman* and not a skinny, messy-haired, awkward dumbass. That's where he was headed, destination otherwise unknown, but his precarious control over the flip flop to grass wetness ratio gave way just when he got to the end of the lawn before the concrete stairs down to the street.

His toes shoved forward because he was walking too fast and he couldn't recover his balance fast enough before teetering forward and landing on the steps, thankfully catching himself on his hands and knees instead of his head (although, even in the pained daze of the rough landing, Will thought a knock to the head might actually rattle a few misplaced pieces into a less embarrassing state of basic sanity).

Sadly, he cried out loudly in surprise and then the ouch of the impact, causing the other angry students to notice him fallen on the steps in a weird position like that kid in *Exorcist*.

*Fuck.*

"Oh, no," and "Aww, poor kid," and "Will, you okay, hon?" and all that stuff cascaded from the acquaintances and Will didn't even answer, never turned back, he just got himself up, dusted his knees of concrete dust unheeding the blood on them and the smarting, blistering skin on his palms, the sting in his fingers, the dizziness that made him nearly stagger.

"I'll go," he heard a terrifyingly familiar, sexy voice say in serious concern, "I'm a doctor. He'll be okay, I'll take care of him."

Shedding their "thank goodnesses" and dissipating back into the night, the other students were gone and Will found himself in Hannibal's hands again. Hannibal had darted for him, down the stairs and caught him on the arms as Will made his way through the parking lot.

"Don't, I'm fine," Will insisted blearily. "I don't want your pity, thank you very–"

"Oh, don't be absurd." Hannibal actually picked Will up by the waist and sat him on the trunk of the nearest car, then immediately began looking him closely over with medically appraising eyes.

"Don't tell me you wanna play doctor now," Will sniffed, crying a little from ongoing embarrassment and now pain, radiating from his knees and hands and knuckles. "I'm not sure I'm in the mood anymore, ex friend of mine."

"I'm not your ex anything, you impossible boy," Hannibal tsked.

He clasped Will's face and examined the tearful bright eyes, checked his head to make sure he hadn't hit it on the stairs. He held Will's trembling hands in his larger ones, so warm and expert, such a good doctor.

"You won't need stitches," Hannibal determined, working quickly as if compelled by strong worry.

He put a hand under each of Will's knees in turn and looked at the bleeding scrapes. "Here either."

“No, not there,” Will shook his head and looked down, watching Hannibal draw his hands away.

Old man Jennings passed by, one of the only people who drove to the meeting. “I’ve got a first aid kit in my car, hang on,” he called, opening his station wagon and retrieving a white case with a red cross on it.

“Thank you, Mr. Jennings,” said Hannibal, a conflicted look still painting his face under the faint light from crescent moon and overhead street lamps. “That’s incredibly helpful.”

“Oh, of course, I got plenty more at the shop. Listen here, take care of him, okay, Hannibal? Will’s a good boy.” Jennings waved goodbye and if Will remained mute to his nice comments, the man probably assumed he was in a bit of pain still from his fall.

God, Will hated metaphors.

Pain from the fall.

What did Hannibal say when he picked up girls and guys in airports and bars and restaurants and passing in the street and at doctor’s offices and hospitals and business office suites and on yachts sailing the crystal blue waters on the other side of the world, “*Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?*”

“I hate your respect for me,” he fussed, flinching when Hannibal carefully cleaned his beat-up palms with an alcohol swab.

“What a foolish thing to say.” Hannibal said nothing more, just went about the business of wrapping Will’s hands in soft white bandages as if he was indescribably precious and delicate.

“I don’t wanna be some delicate kid you’re afraid to hurt. I wish I was twenty five. I wish I was old enough to be one of your one night stands, that’d be enough for me compared to nothing.” His voice was wobbling over a precipice and he ached all over. Tears dripped down his cheeks as he looked down at his knees now being tended as thoughtfully and expertly, Hannibal looking up at him, somehow the look seeming firm.

“You’re not the kind of boy one has a one night stand with, Will Graham. That isn’t going to change in the course of eight years.”

“Oh, I’m so vulnerable and in need of protection from a savage ne’er do well like you.” Will scoffed. “Guess we’d be a bad match anyway, huh? Heard you don’t do relationships.”

“I never really saw the point.” Hannibal finished placing a large bandaid over each of Will’s knees. He started packing up the first aid kit. “Do you want some tylenol?”

“I’d settle for some eye contact.”

“It’s not that easy,” Hannibal sighed, meeting Will’s gaze again regretfully.

“Are you sure? Because for you, I am that easy.”

Will knew how he must look, tear-streaked face, sniffly nose all red, eyes bloodshot. His failed seduction outfit still leaving so much skin on display, curls mussed with dried rainwater and sweat and his hand fiddling with them nervously all night. His daring expression, his shamelessness. He almost admired his own doomed boldness in the sense that he really never knew he had it in him till now.

“That’s not what I heard.” Hannibal closed the first aid kit and looked at him with exasperated but unmistakable admiration. “I heard that you’re a good boy, Will.”

“You. Heard. Wrong.” Will sat up straighter and flexed his fingers, still feeling the wonderful tingles left behind by Hannibal’s touch more than he felt the pain of his injuries.

“I don’t think so.”

“Maybe it depends what I’m good at. Aside, of course, from destroying a friendship that might’ve been really nice.” He gave up at last and heaved a defeated sigh. “I was gonna ask if you wanted to go get coffee after the meeting, that was the plan. The plan wasn’t to corner you in a stairwell and make Julia Roberts eyes at you with Demi Moore dialogue.”

“I only understood some of that,” Hannibal admitted, “But there’s no need to be embarrassed. You’re a very attractive boy and someone your age would–”

“It’s never gonna stop being embarrassing cause it ain’t gonna *stop,*” Will explained. He wriggled off the car and hit the pavement with a wince.

“Will. Please go easy on yourself,” Hannibal begged, framing Will with his hands, a pure and unseductive touch on both of the boy’s arms. “Watch where you’re going, be careful. Don’t ever make me worry like that again.”

“Why should you care?”

“I just do. Is it that unbelievable to you that I could care for you and not want to impose upon you, that I’d want the best for you?” Hannibal let him go after squeezing his arms, right on that spot where Will had earned a little bit of muscle in his biceps from boating, when he’d been hired down at the docks for odd jobs with under the table pay.

For some reason, the parts of him he’d managed to make attractive and grown up felt more sensitive and he moaned when Hannibal squeezed him there.

“Did I –”

“No, Jesus, you didn’t hurt me, Hannibal. I’m gonna go find myself a good hiding place from the outright humiliation of this night, if you don’t mind. This conversation is a train goin’ round the same ol’ track and it’s gettin’ damn tired. Me, too. I guess I’ll see you around.”

“You actually think I’m going to let you hobble off like that, in distress and with no destination in mind?” Hannibal chided, easily catching up to him again.

Will made his way down Main Street defiantly. “Now I can’t shake you off. I’m fine, Dr. Lecter. Please get back to your amazing, glamorous superior life. Although if you ask me,

you oughta hit your uncle back the next time. I hate that he hurt you. I'm-- never mind, you're an adult, you can handle it, blah blah, please handle it. I don't wanna worry about you either."

"You don't need to. I'm used to Robertus, and he's no major threat." Hannibal spoke plainly yet Will didn't quite believe him.

Will blathered on, "I'll just use my coffee money which I won't need for our scam–"

"Scam?" Walking by his side, Hannibal looked majestic, so fucking close. So close to Will's fantasy of holding hands right on this very street for all the town to see.

"A scam's a date with a friend that you're hoping turns into more than a friend. Anyway, I'm gonna take that money and get myself somethin' to eat and drink and then go home, where Earl will be out because he's always out, and pretty far from this side of town, at night. It's safe and I'll be *fine.* I'll sleep it off, isn't that the healthy thing to do?"

"Where are you going?" Hannibal asked, "I'll buy you a sandwich or–"

"That's what we American teenagers eat, huh? Goddamn sandwiches." Will realized that Hannibal wasn't going to stop following him, and his rebellious streak burst out of him again as they passed a bar.

"Isn't it?" Hannibal frowned, genuinely confused.

"That's beside the point," Will muttered, busily looking at the establishment they had passed.

This bar, the Tipsy Tap, happened to have a lowkey reputation for serving underage without asking questions. The local teens had kept it quiet for fear of losing this rare treat. But Will had heard, without ever previously caring.

"Goodnight, Hannibal," Will smirked, feeling downright evil. He walked into the Tipsy Tap and pulled up a stool.

He knew what was going to happen and he loved the rush of power it gave him. Hannibal would hesitate a few beats, then follow him in for fear he'd get into trouble in this adult establishment that sold alcohol. So Will gestured enthusiastically to the bartender and ordered himself a beer, then settled in to wait, feeling bizarrely victorious.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from the song "Paper Cup" by Heather Nova

Is Will right that Hannibal is going to follow him into the bar?

**Next time:** back to the future, where Hannibal encounters Will at -- yes -- the very same bar from the night just described, but many years later...

Sigh..."I am once again.gif": If you don't like it, if you aren't pleased with some aspect, if you think you see a mistake: do not tell me. I will. Delete. It. Back button: make friends with it.

Everyone else, I love you, thanks so much for reading 🥰

# Like a video of you playing

Chapter Notes

> Hello again friends! I've written a ton more (actually true of all my fics 😩) and simply haven't gotten a single chance to revise and post till this week. Hope you enjoy! I'll have more up shortly. ❤️

*"Baby, baby I love you, it's nonstop memories of you*

*it's like a video of you playing*

*it's all loops of seven hour kisses cut*

*with a couple near misses cut*

*to the scene of the actor saying, tell me baby, baby, why do I feel so bad?"* - Aimee Mann

**Will. Now.**

***

Obviously, it made no sense to flee your own place of business and leave the ex-boyfriend you'd just smothered in kisses and half-seduced slumped against his newly repaired luxury vehicle.

He'd left Hannibal to find his own popped-off buttons on the floor and make an undignified exit. Will knew he was smart enough to work the electric garage door and lock up behind him when he left, but was he clever enough, did he know Will enough to see through his latest rejection, to see it for what it was, how Will truly felt?

God, Will hoped not.

He tried to cram Hannibal back into the corner of his mind where he had indeed been attempting to trap him for many a year without succeeding, only to find that the memory of making out on the Bentley and grinding like not one second had passed since August of 1993 kept replaying and replaying on a loop.

After beating a fast path home and arriving sweat-streaked though no less crazy, Will stood in the kitchen while the screen door slammed behind him. He realized that in the mad rush to get away, he had also left his truck behind at work, and furthermore that Hannibal had not opted to go after him, which would have been easy enough in the Bentley.

He wasn't disappointed that Hannibal had obviously had enough of his incomprehensible games and driven off to the Chateau for a properly elegant and forced holiday season. Not at all.

The fucking flashback kept going, while he attacked the stack of dirty dishes in the kitchen sink and got started making dinner. He could still feel his lips tingling and swollen from the pressure, the nibbling and sucking, the bruising heat of Hannibal's kiss. He licked his mouth and shook his head, flinging a baking pan on the stovetop.

He could get rid of it. It was just a memory of a kiss; he must have a hundred of those with Hannibal, enough to play on a video loop for seven hours at least. This had been less than seven *minutes* of his life, and he was just blowing off steam was all…he was upset about the twins and the business trouble from impending competition, mad that the town was changing with the times (finally), chagrined by the growing stack of bills on the table and his malfunctioning cell phone which he couldn't use to immediately send alarm bell and misery-face emojis to Charlie and Grady so they could advise him on this latest disaster and– and–

"Stupid, stupid, annoying, preppy big city doctor," Will muttered to the chicken breasts and drumsticks he had spiced and dipped in buttermilk that morning, now aggressively slapping the meat with cornstarch, salt, pepper and flour.

He'd forgotten to preheat the oven. Sighing, he stabbed the button several times to set it to 400. Then, knowing he'd forget to check it had heated fully, he set the timer for ten minutes. It was so easy to forget important dangers, so damn hard to ignore seductive ones.

"Obnoxious, lying, neglectful son of a gun, stupid George Clooney GQ looking–"

His angry tangent was cut off by the sound of the front door being flung open and two pairs of sandals stomping in with the usual decorum – none.

"I'm not a loser, you're a loser, loser," shouted Rhett, laughing with his sister.

"Still beat you with the high score, dumbass," retorted Savannah Jean, soon after letting out that particular cry that meant her twin had yanked her pigtail again. "*Hey!*"

That meant that she'd socked her brother in the arm, again.

Will sighed, finally managing to put The Hannibal Problem aside, as it was parenting time. Oh, this wasn't going to be fun.

Was it hot in his house, despite the central air, or was it just the oven getting going? As a lifelong Louisianan, it had to be pretty hot for Will to feel it – why wasn't the AC taking the edge off?

He swiped at his damp forehead and upper lip, then intercepted his foster children attempting to stampede upstairs mid-argument. The backpacks they'd brought to the arcade in town had been tossed to the floor where anyone might trip over them. As. Usual.

The bags were most likely stuffed with undone homework and notes from their teachers with various reminders and remonstrances. Rather than being allies, the teachers seemed more like experts on making Will feel like an even worse dad than he already did.

“Oh, hey, Dad,” Savannah Jean said brightly while her brother scowled and crossed his arms. “How was your day?”

“Don’t ask. How was *yours*?”

“Fine,” Rhett replied sullenly.

Rhett had a hell of a nerve acting like an edgy twenty-five year old who barely knew Will as a passing acquaintance – a distantly tolerated housemate – when in reality, he was a gangly fourteen year old who was already in trouble.

“Is that all, or?” Rhett crossed his arms, hostile as Savannah Jean was a little too cheerful, trying to make up the difference.

She was always running in circles mediating the family tensions, and Will often felt exhausted on her behalf. If you put the two of them together, they made up a lot of his same qualities; maybe that was why Will had been so drawn to giving them a home.

Or part of the reason, anyway.

Will was beginning to feel like this day was approximately two hundred hours long. He could use another beer, something stronger, another hook-up with Hannibal– *no!*

Traitorous mind and heart. He reeled in the wayward thoughts and returned to his proper attitude, that of the righteous Dad who was Not Angry, Just Disappointed, but in a loving way.

“It’s not all, actually,” Will replied, looking sternly at the kids. “You two need to come into the den and *sit.* We’re having a family discussion. Bring your backpacks.”

Will took up his place in his preferred reading chair, which was soft and upholstered in a pattern of blue anchors. He’d found the chair on consignment a few years back and thought it was just right for the room with its gentle ocean shaded decor. The last girl he’d brought home after a date had called this chair an eyesore, but he didn’t care; his date was a bit of a disappointment herself as it later turned out – because of *course* she was.

The twins sat on the blue-grey sofa across from him. Rhett looked hostile, Savannah Jean sweet but concerned. The tweens were almost completely identical with their straw-colored hair, freckles, long, skinny legs in jean shorts and eyes that might be called grey but often looked more like lavender.

“I hate family meetings,” Rhett complained, and Savannah Jean elbowed him, murmuring, “*Stop.*”

“Be that as it may.” Will gestured, “Dump out your backpacks, please.”

“What? That’s a total invasion of privacy!” Rhett was already shouting and they were less than two minutes into the family meeting.

Will’s head started throbbing. It was *definitely* too hot. What the hell was going on with the A.C.? He glared up at the central air vents, planning to investigate after the current disaster-meeting.

“Can I just go to the bathroom first?” Savannah Jean asked politely, looking shifty.

Will nodded. “Sure, of course.” He waited for her to predictably attempt to take the bag with her and dispose of any contraband in the bathroom down the hall.

“Leave the bag.”

She pouted and did as she was told. Will and Rhett sat in silence until she came back, the kid avoiding eye contact while his foster dad repressed a sigh of intense frustration and the ongoing urge to shake a fist at the universe.

It was a real challenge to keep up his fatherly poker face and always be The Calm One when he had a mess of his own anxious pressures and the twins were a handful – highly intelligent but emotionally immature and bereft of any education in manners before he took them in.

“Okay, here you go, then,” Rhett glowered, unceremoniously tipping his backpack over and spilling its contents onto the floor.

Savannah Jean did the same, chewing her lip nervously and exchanging definite “partners in crime” glances with her brother.

“Fascinating, huh?” Rhett fumed, crossing his arms.

Will chose not to roll his eyes, but it was damn hard not to.

Looking down at the dusky blue rug, Will quickly surveyed the outpouring of Twin Stuff:

-Many balled up papers, some of which likely teacher’s notes addressed to Will.
-Pencils with their erasers chewed off and the wood part covered in bite marks (Savannah Jean)
-A goddamn lighter (Rhett)
-An exploded blue pen which had covered a notebook and a battered science textbook in ink (Rhett again)
-An impressive assortment of Wet N Wild makeup products, from lip glosses to highlighters and blushes (Savannah Jean had on glittery pink gloss at the moment and Will noticed her cheeks looked redder than the embarrassing situation called for, a fourteen year old’s idea of high glamor)
-Each of them had piles of penny candy, sticks and taffy, Now and Laters, dum dum lollipops, and even those weird little wax bottles of liquid candy that no one ever actually ate.

“Now, y’all didn’t do your chores last week, so I know you haven’t been spending the allowance I *didn’t* give out on candy, makeup and–” Will leaned down and snatched up the

lighter, which was black with an “Edgy” design of orange flames. “Things that can start a fire!”

*Breathe. Calm down. At least there aren’t any drugs or cigarettes.*

“We’re sorry, Dad,” Savannah Jean frowned, torn between annoyance at being caught and genuine penitence.

“Speak for yourself,” Rhett snapped, “And he ain’t our Dad.”

“Speak for *yourself,*” Savannah Jean retorted. Now both twins had their arms crossed.

“Look,” Will pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes briefly, blinking in the futile hope the clouds of stress would clear. “Hollis from down at the Apothecary y’all stole from was kind enough to hold off goin’ to the police – for now. It's just dumb luck you got caught by a friend of mine instead of one of the other store owners in town who most likely wouldn't have given you a second chance to behave."

Will was a bit out of breath. Somehow, he doubted this sort of thing was quite so difficult when you had two parents instead of one doing the job of two.

He gritted his teeth as Rhett shouted, flying to his feet, “*So let ‘em go to the police! I don’t give a shit!*”

“Sit down,” Will admonished, “And watch your language, son.”

“Ain’t your son. Don’t have to be here or listen to anything you say. We’ll take what we want and do what we want. That’s what we’ve always done, and no one ever cared before,” Rhett raged on. He didn’t sit down.

“Yeah, and it really shows,” Will sighed. “You’re gonna have to accept that this is what happens when the one responsible for your care actually *cares.* I know it’s a big adjustment, but the days of you two runnin’ around town like young bandits spreadin’ mayhem far and wide are *ended.* You’ll tell me where you’re goin’, exactly where you’re goin’, why and for how long when you leave this house for somewhere other than school. *You’ll go to school* instead of skipping half the time. You’ll stick to your curfew. And you’ll learn to show me, plus the other adults in your life some respect–”

“Oh? Mmhmm?” Rhett was dangerously thoughtful for a moment. “That so?”

“Rhett, don’t,” Savannah Jean cautioned, turning to Will. “Dad, please. Just let it go, like it never happened. We’ll try to do better.”

“S.J., I can’t just ‘let it go’ so that we don’t have to argue. Y’all are fourteen and you cannot be allowed to misbehave without any discipline. It’s only because I love the two of you that I’m being firm about the rules.”

Savannah Jean scowled tearfully. Rhett got madder. “‘Love?’” He spat incredulously. “Like you know anything about that, *Will.* You’re all alone, ever wonder why that is? If you treat everyone you *love* like this, all you’re gonna get in return is hate.”

“Simmer down,” Will said, gesturing for him to sit down, though he knew it was a pointless command. “All kids hate their parents – okay, or their foster parents – when they get grounded, which y’all are, by the way–”

“*What?*” Rhett looked shocked with youthful wrath that far outdid the situation.

Only the fact that no one before Will had ever laid down the law about rules and behavior made him sure Rhett wasn’t feigning the surprise, even if he did layer it in melodrama.

“Someday not too long from now you’ll understand why,” Will tried to reason.

“I’m goin’ to Mrs. Saunderson’s,” Rhett hissed, naming the kindly older lady down the street who sometimes watched the twins. “She doesn’t insult us or try to make our lives miserable. And her cookin’s way better’n yours anyway.”

“Now, that part is just not true, and you know it,” Will insisted, genuinely insulted and self-righteous on the topic.

“I’m so sorry we’re just not perfect enough for you,” Savannah Jean said with a scrunched up, teary-eyed face.

Even though the words and her sadness broke his heart all over again, Will knew that on some level she was manipulative when she confronted his discipline with these types of statements. But she didn’t entirely even realize she was being manipulative. Once she got rolling, she could go on like this with the waterworks for ages.

“Now look what you did,” Rhett accused, “I’m outta here, c’mon S.J.”

Savannah Jean gave Will one last pitiful look with the big teary eyes, but she had chosen poorly as to the expression. Will himself had used the doe-eyed, helpless sad boy routine to wriggle out of plenty of scrapes as a youngster.

“You don’t have to run outta here like he’s the boss of you, Savannah Jean.”

“Where he goes, I go,” she sniffed with damaged dignity. Hell if she didn’t remind him of Hannibal every now and again, too.

Will guessed there were just certain habits that one developed from being, essentially, a stray in this world.

The twins stormed out and let the door slam behind them, *again,* knowing perfectly well that Will couldn’t hold them back physically. One time Will had put a hand on Rhett’s shoulder to halt the tween in the midst of a similar situation, and the kid tried to scream child abuse.

If only Rhett realized that Will’s own childhood had made that kind of abuse the most abhorrent, upsetting thing in the world to him. But he had never, and didn’t plan to use sob stories of his younger days in order to force an endearment that the twins wouldn’t feel otherwise. Plus, he didn’t like going back to those dark places in his mind where the younger Will still trembled in fear and hid in nooks and crannies.

“Son of a bitch,” Will muttered, relieved when he took out his phone and saw that the network was working again. An early Christmas present.

He fired off a quick text to Mrs. Saunderson to let her know the twins were incoming and asking that she tell him if she couldn’t watch them that evening.

Maybe he oughta send the Sheriff or one of the deputies at least over there to talk some innocuously threatening sense into those two little imps, but Will couldn’t find the heart or emotional energy to make the call right then. And anyway. He looked at the air conditioning duct again, then stood on the chair to fan his hand over the openings.

“Yep, it’s busted alright,” he murmured. And he was too broke to fix it until next week at last. He’d have to tinker with it himself, he guessed, despite being exhausted in every sense.

*Damn it all…*

***

He was out in the backyard tinkering accordingly with the external settings of the A.C. units when he heard an obnoxiously familiar voice calling out, “I’ll hang them on the line then, Pauline. Won’t be a moment.”

Will stopped short with a screwdriver in one hand. He’d been cry-fixing for about fifteen minutes now, this being a term he’d invented in his own mind to describe the way he would keep on working through his frequent crying jags. Especially since the divorce, he’d been excruciatingly sensitive and he couldn’t stop in the middle of important tasks *everytime* some common frustration or just hearing the wrong song would set him off.

He turned around, eyes foggy with stinging tears, sweat pouring off of him, and saw Dr. Hannibal fucking Lecter hanging laundry on the clothesline over at Grady and Pauline’s.

“Oh, you gotta be kidding me,” he scowled, tossing down his tools on the lawn like a crazy person (or at least a crazier person than usual).

He bolted at a respectably Rhett-like speed towards Grady’s house and knocked on the door, hard, hurting his knuckles.

“Well, dammit, Will, we ain’t deaf,” Grady said mildly, appearing at the door with his usual pre-dinner bowl of cereal.

His friend looked so innocent in his work clothes with his collar open, cookie monster slippers on his feet, Christmas music playing in the background while Pauline scurried around with her usual amiably chaotic energy urging the kids to do something or other, throwing in a breezy “Oh, hey, Will” as she went.

“Hey, Pauline,” Will replied politely. He then glared at Grady. “Don’t look at me all innocent, pal. Tell me why Hannibal Lecter is currently in your backyard pinning up your *socks* to dry.”

“You know, they do shrink if you put them in the dryer,” Grady shrugged. His brow furrowed slightly. “Have you been…” whispering, “*cry-working* again? Is everything okay?”

“Shhhh!” Will insisted, “I’m fine except for my kids hating me and you providing room and board to my long-ago ex. *What is he doing here?*”

“Pauline said she said Hannibal could stay with us until he’s done with this visit, so that’s after Christmas I suppose. Seems he offered to help with the cookin’ and cleanin’, plus he’s like weirdly good at it for a doctor. Pauline could really use the help these days, so I didn’t see any harm–”

“Perfect,” Will groaned. “You even have some relatively justifiable reason for letting my ex stay longer than the exactly one night only I suggested, so that I can’t come and go from my own house in peace–”

“Hello, Will,” said Hannibal with a thoughtful sort of peacefulness that didn’t match his eyes.

He stepped up behind Grady with his hands folded behind his back, looking every inch the perfect gentleman, plus freshly showered and debonair where Will was a complete mess. Instead of a sweaty t-shirt and seen-better-days jeans, Hannibal wore another annoying “casual-elegant” outfit, well-fitting khakis and loafers, plus a pure white polo shirt that stuck to his powerful body like pornographic glue.

Hannibal had no right to look like that, much less with that cute apron, borrowed from Pauline and tied casually around his slender waist. Only comfort was the wrecked way those amber eyes looked every time they landed on Will.

Hellish comfort.

“Um, why don’t y’all hash this out and come to some kind of compromise?” Grady suggested, trying to evade the whole situation.

No point complaining that Grady was “whipped” and just did whatever Pauline said. Of course he was and he did, but who wouldn’t if they had an amazing wife like her? Will didn’t want to inconvenience the busy and overburdened mom during the holidays. But not complaining further about the situation of Hannibal’s temporary residency didn’t mean he had to linger here in his ex’s intolerable presence for another second.

“Yeah, no thank you,” Will replied sharply. “I think he’s said enough to me to last this whole trip and done enough too.”

Was that even *true*? Will felt hypocritical, and knew he must really have gone around the bend now -- because he also felt a bit weirdly...guilty. For hurting the feelings of the man who had broken his heart and abandoned him years before, the man he'd dreamt of in melancholy shades of ruination for two decades since who now had the gall to try and fool him into thinking his intentions were genuine *again*? What. the. hell. Feeling badly about it only made Will want to be meaner, although to Hannibal or himself he wasn't quite sure.

“Far be it from me to hassle you with my presence,” Hannibal said with a sneer, offended. He walked away, further into the house where Will heard Pauline consulting him about tinsel placement.

“You see how obnoxiously unreasonable he is?” Will fumed pointlessly to Grady, who shrugged again.

“Sure.”

“You think *I’m* being unreasonable?” The pitch in Will’s voice rose higher, not least of all because he could still hear Hannibal’s voice, that gentle rumble that stirred the biggest, most destructive waves in his soul, coming from inside the house.

“Didn’t say that. I’ll tell you what I told him: don’t involve me. I’m on your side, but I’m not a divorce attorney or mediator–”

“We aren’t married! That’s it, whatever. I’m goin.’”

“Aw hell, what’s that I smell burnin’?” Grady looked behind him, slightly alarmed, a beat before Pauline ran to the kitchen where a distinctly ominous smell and grey smoke were brewing.

“It’s okay, y’all, but looks like Hannibal’s casserole is burned to a crisp,” Pauline announced.

She’d turned off the stove, and a few good swipes of her hands dispelled the smoke.

“As I had mentioned, Pauline, it was a Languedoc cassoulet,” Hannibal corrected, coming back into view and ignoring Will for the time being. “I would never usually be so forgetful, but it seems as if someone has caused me to fall into a state of distraction.”

“Someone doesn’t wanna hear your nonsense,” Will groused. “Bye,” he added to Grady. “Have a nice night. Y’all can have the chicken I made for my dinner, it’s in the oven, should be finished by now. Do me a solid and turn it off?”

“‘Course, but where are you going? You look terrible, no offense.”

“None taken.” Will rolled his eyes, hands perched on his hips. He pressed his lips together, then said, “And where do you think I’m going? I’ll be at that bar if anyone needs me.”

# Heartbreak Regulars

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*”By definition, we're just missing somebody / And, instead of reminiscing, we pull up a barstool / In our own way, we celebrate / Like it's somebody's damn birthday / Just do what you want to / 'Cause we ain't gonna judge you”* - Tenille Arts

**Hannibal. Now.**

***

Hannibal knew his lips could not possibly still be tingling from Will’s kiss, but it certainly felt that way. His affections had long since stirred up absurd intensities when it came to the man of his life, and clearly that had not changed. He could also, of course, attribute the ruined cassoulet with some consternation to Will, and might have assigned more gusto to the attempted resentment had the boy not looked so utterly forlorn when he visited a few minutes ago.

He threw out the tarnished masterpiece of culinary perfection with an appropriate look of sternness cast upon the meat and vegetables in a savory sauce which would have been an ideal family dinner.

As Grady had gone forth to collect the abandoned oven-fried chicken from Will’s house, Hannibal conceded to the alteration in menu, again distractedly.

He acclimated to the somewhat jarring vocalizations of the children who were arguing over a board game in the living room, plus the clashing, wholly offensive barrage of sentimental holiday music that to some extent made him want nothing more than to scream and throw the burned dinner in its cast-iron skillet though the window with a satisfying crash of broken glass.

Settling for the broken glass remaining embedded in his heart rather than Grady and Pauline’s front yard, Hannibal considered his options for the evening’s remaining hours.

He was in no mood to go “home” to the chateau for another visit. That much was certain.

Should he remain there and have dinner with the family, he feared he would be “a downer” as it was simply too difficult to feign enthusiasm when he could not possibly stop thinking about Will and loving Will and missing Will and worrying about Will and aching for Will and something more active must surely be done on that count.

Hence, he went to Grady and asked, casual as could be, he thought, “Did I overhear Will saying that he was going to a bar this evening?”

Grady slid the pan of chicken onto the kitchen counter and groaned. “You two really deserve each other if you ask me. Yeah, he did, why, you gonna follow him? Swear y’all chase the tail of this supposedly over relationship like a pair of wacky boomerangs.”

“What a charming metaphor,” Hannibal replied with a feigned friendly smile. It would not do to damage Grady’s fragile patience with his antics. He was well-aware these were *antics* but could not seem to stop himself.

There was something *exciting* in this loss of self-control and his usual rigid restraint. He hadn’t felt this alive in years.

“And which bar is so lucky as to have Will Graham as its regular patron?”

Grady had found a bag of french fries, or what passed for them in some dubious circles, in the freezer and was spreading them on another baking sheet.

“I suppose you’ll be impossible to shake off until I tell you. Anyway, you heard what the man said, Doctor.” Grady preheated the oven then looked back at Hannibal, very slight sympathy creasing his forehead at the sight of the man looking quite that much like a starving wild animal seeking its only comfort. “He went to that bar.”

***

Hannibal supposed that in this more “P.C.” day and age, a bar with the name of “The Tipsy Tap” and the logo of an intoxicated squirrel immersed in a bathtub full of beer would possibly no longer “fly.”

Yet he was a little sad to see how changed the place was, at least externally. Rather than the absolute dive which Will used to laughingly call “a wretched hive of scum and villainy” – apparently a *Star Wars* reference – the place looked very nearly respectable. The brick exterior looked as if it had been cleaned at least within the last few years, and the sign now bore resemblance to a license plate, fashionably coy and hip.

“‘That Bar,’” Hannibal murmured, repeating the name on the sign.

Apparently Will had been all too blunt when indicating his planned exodus’ end point, and Hannibal had to wonder if that had been on purpose since he himself had obviously been in earshot. His heart skipped a beat, embarrassingly enough, at the mere thought.

It was a sultry, sticky night despite the nonstop Christmas decorations that covered every single street in the town, not that there were that many streets. Hannibal believed the Angel Woodsians inundated the comparatively minuscule square footage with a sufficient number of smiling Rudolphs, Father Christmases and elves for a big city. Perhaps they made up for the cynicism found in such cities, the coldness of Baltimore no longer tempting Hannibal to escape. He had managed to forget the oddly addictive hominess of the place while reviling it in his mind all these years.

A pleasant hum of country music came from inside the cozy-looking bar. Tasteful Christmas lights were hung outside along with signs proudly stating the awards from local food critics

which the bar had won due to its apparently sublime menu offerings. He went inside and scanned the place, making hurried but not unimpressed note of the pleasant environs. The large room seemed welcoming, with its rustic wood design and the way an intimate dimness was offset by a golden lighting scheme overhead.

The tables and stools were well-populated, smiling and festive patrons numerous as the candy canes, glowing multicolored lights and wreaths on the walls. Hannibal felt himself immediately the object of interested chatter, so he nodded and smiled to those vaguely familiar faces he recognized as he walked about slowly canvassing the place seeking his -- that is, seeking Will.

He tried not to allow the occasional flutter of unaccountable insecurity to flourish into panic, as that would deter him in his (almost) (somewhat) (perhaps) desperate attempts to be close to Will again. Confidence was key to the project, so he must – at all costs – keep a sprig of zest, occupied with cheerfully festive holly berries, nestled in his heart.

Despite the deep dark inside him, Hannibal always projected the airiest persona of effortless cool when he was home in Baltimore among his sort of people. He preferred to move in circles of the elite, as though still proving points to his uncle about his worth; his social ambition would have known no bounds except that he'd never really had to try. People gravitated towards his smooth attitude, fascinating, exotic accent, his wit and cleverness, his skill in the kitchen…and the bedroom.

It was a *bit* different in Angel Wood, where he was by far the most dressed up person on site. All of the bar patrons were dressed down in shorts, tank tops and t-shirts, many emblazoned with various holiday sentiments. No color was considered "too loud," no sequin or gaudy fringe neglected. Oh, to build a bonfire of all the dreadful fashion he had to look at in this close knit, gossiping little place.

With a brief, despondent sigh, he reminded himself that if he wanted to make a good impression on the people with whom Will regularly associated, that line of thinking might not be the best start.

When he found Will, sitting alone at the furthest end of the bar nursing a short glass of whiskey on ice, Hannibal nearly tripped over the next table he passed while uttering a quick apology to the people sitting there.

Hannibal had been told his own looks could stop traffic, but there was his own pleasing yet confused visage in the mirror, and then there was Will Graham. Nobody else looked like that. And yet Will was apparently immune to the fact that once again, plenty of people were staring at him, no doubt entranced by his gorgeous jaw line covered in delectable scruff. Now Hannibal knew what it felt like against his lips and face while kissing, and he needed to feel it again, with the heat of those perfect, angelic pink lips.

The scornful blaze in his vivid blue eyes could make gods of beauty faint, no doubt, and when he had seen Will earlier at Grady's house, the younger man had been divine in that dirty t-shirt, curls twisted wetly on his forehead and a flush of indignation on his face. Since arriving at the bar, he had changed, now wearing a black t-shirt, now having slicked his hair

back, presumably with water from the men's room. He was absolute paradise to behold, without ever trying or indeed particularly caring.

Hannibal managed to make his way closer without any further mishaps and paused by Will's side, clearing his throat. "Is this seat taken?"

"Now, why would you follow me, Hannibal?" Will asked irritably, swigging back more whiskey.

How his mouth would taste of sweetness and spice, how raw and hard his kisses were–

"Well?" Will demanded.

He turned to face Hannibal more fully, revealing that his t-shirt bore the bar's logo and was a bit boxy on his slender but well-built body.

"I came to apologize," Hannibal said, injecting the utmost sincerity although he was not convinced he had been in the wrong at any point that evening. "And to say that if you would prefer I didn't stay with Grady and Pauline, I will pack my bags for the Chateau within the hour."

"Oh, you saint." Will laid a hand over his heart with a sarcastic smirk. His eyes twinkled as if he was secretly amused. "Just stay put, Pauline really could use the help and it'll do you good to be around wholesome, regular folks. Maybe it'll take you down a few pegs, listening to kid tantrums and watching *A Christmas Story* on repeat."

"You say that almost as if you care about me, as if you would like to see me evolve to be happier and healthier. Much as you did when arranging for Grady to rescue me from the bench in front of your garage–"

"No, I did no such goddamn thing. You're nuttier than Delta Dawn's fruitcake, and trust me, that's sayin' somethin'."

Will gestured to the heavy-looking fruitcake covered in plastic wrap on the other side of him, resting on the bar along with a cutting implement and some red/green paper plates.

"Delta Dawn became a baker?" Hannibal looked amazed. "I would have thought her destined for some other path, a supermodel perhaps or a trophy wife to some jet-setting millionaire, or–"

"Or a humble barkeep?" Delta Dawn herself appeared, unsurprisingly wearing the same t-shirt Will sported, although she had customized hers by cutting a lower neckline and holes in the shoulders for an edgy, yet stylish effect.

"As I live and breathe," Hannibal marveled, clasping her outstretched hand with nothing but gentlemanly conduct, yet hoping he drove Will wild with jealousy. "You haven't changed a bit, Delta. This is your place, I take it?"

"Well, mine and Jenna's," she grinned, nodding towards a co-worker who was making a great show of creating candy cane martinis for customers at the bar, all the while talking a mile a

minute.

“Her husband used to own the place but he passed a few years back and I had just gotten divorced from hubbie number two at that time so we thought, shit, let’s go into business together.” Delta Dawn laughed, “What did we have to lose?”

“Jenna Hathaway?” Hannibal slowly recognized the more petite, freckled lady who never stopped chattering, begging the question of how and when she breathed.

“In the flesh,” Will muttered. He was twisting up a bright red napkin, frustration making his jaw tense, though his remarks remained amusedly cynical. “And she still knows things.”

“Jenna knows all things, so you watch your back and behave while you’re in town, now, you hear?” Delta Dawn slapped Hannibal’s shoulder lightly with another musical giggle.

Hannibal could feel the heat of Will’s glare on his face as if it had physically manifested to attack him.

“I never do,” Hannibal winked.

“So, you in town for the holidays or what?” Delta Dawn inquired, interrupting herself suddenly to add, “Oops, where are my manners. What are you drinkin’, sugar?”

Will put his now empty glass down with a force just short of slamming it. “I’ll have another whiskey, please.” His voice was tight, patience thinning.

“And I will have the same,” Hannibal said with his same old charm. He rested his tanned arms on the bar and said affably, “Yes, in answer to your earlier question. I am here visiting my Uncle Robertus and the family. How are yours doing, by the way?”

Delta Dawn filled Hannibal in on simply everything in her amazing, fun-filled life, from the Christmas cocktails she’d invented herself to the top three contenders for husband number three. “I might have to add you to the list as an honorary mention, though, honey,” she blushed.

“I’m honored,” Hannibal smoldered coyly.

Aware of the quiet anger beside him slowly morphing into a possibly murderous rage, he felt delightedly sure he had accomplished the desired jealous effect. Now, to pull it back accordingly and reassure Will of his devotion.

"However, my heart is already spoken for. I'm rather desperately in love and determined to prove it to my sweetheart."

"Ridiculous," Will muttered, seeming to embody relief and annoyance without understanding which one was in charge.

“Oh, Dr. Lecter, don't tease an innocent girl like that! Are you fixin’ to end up on the naughty list? Santa’s always watchin’, you know,” she purred, dragging one finger nonchalantly down

the shining wood surface of the bar. She had on long red nails with sparkling, tiny Christmas trees stickers on them, a motif that matched her large, glittery earrings.

Another customer approached, then another, and Delta Dawn was busy for a while.

“You know, she really is a sweetheart,” Will informed him tersely, glaring again. “If you’re thinking about stickin’ around here tonight. She even gave me this t-shirt when I showed up lookin’ like a bat outta sweaty hell.”

“I’m only here because you are, Will,” said Hannibal, blinking slowly, still standing because he’d not been invited to sit. He sipped his whiskey. “And as I recall, it wasn’t so long ago you were assisting me with my potential entry onto the naughty list–”

“No I wasn’t,” Will snapped.

He didn’t leave through, didn’t get up and run off to avoid the conversation or Hannibal’s presence. He remained in place as if compelled by some invisible force, whether stubborn pride or Hannibal’s influence combined with that of the alcohol.

“In your garage, earlier this–”

“That never happened.” Will’s tone left no room for argument. But he looked a bit pink in the face and the temperature was entirely comfortable in the bar.

“The missing buttons on my shirt and vest suggest otherwise.” Hannibal enjoyed watching his ex blush even more deeply. “I’m fairly certain that it *did* happen, Will. It’s the best memory I’ve had to savor in retrospect for many years, and I don’t intend to forget it anytime soon.”

“Free country,” Will retorted. “Cherish your delusions of sexual grandeur. And will you sit already? You look weird standing there like a stalker. Even though coming here after me was total stalker behavior.”

Hannibal sat down, and this time he was the one blushing. “Thank you. You know, I was worried about you, Will, back at the house. There were tear tracks on your face and your eyes were…” He trailed off, finding a place of emotion which words could not convey.

“Red? Bloodshot, yeah. I know. But it’s fine. Have trouble with cryin’ sometimes. I try to ignore it ‘till it goes away.”

“I could never keep away from you, nor resist the overwhelming urge to offer comfort and affection when you look like that. Those blue eyes, your soft curls, your angel face tormented by distress. That look is still the heartbreaker.”

“Oh, brother.” Will groaned. “Quit with the callbacks to our short-lived romantic vernacular, would you?”

“Being here with you, it feels to me that nothing has changed. That is an illusion, but it feels more real than anything I have felt since leaving this place.”

“Leavin’ *me,*” came Will’s surly correction.

“Because you insisted that I leave you,” Hannibal argued.

“Not permanently.” Will fished a laminated, tall bar menu out from a container of them nearby and put it between them. “You eat yet? Just realized I’m famished.”

“You just don’t want to talk about the past, much less reveal whatever crime you think that I committed, when in fact *you* are the one who chose that our separation should be permanent. I never would have–”

"Bullshit. And I never said you committed a *crime,* other than, you know..." Will leaned in, still holding off eye contact like a gift with which he was stingy as a defense mechanism. Hannibal accepted the small pleasure of proximity as Will whispered, "*blueberry egg mcmuffin.*"

"Shhh," said Hannibal in concern, "don't speak of...b.e.m. in public, Will."

"Hannibal, not only did no other living soul but us know that code phrase, but it's been twenty years." Will leaned back to his own assigned personal space and added wryly, "Pretty sure the statute of limitations has passed."

"Be that as it may, discretion is still my instinct on the matter." Hannibal shrugged in his own elegant fashion and sighed, "At any rate, I did not allude to *actual* criminal activity, but to crimes of the heart. I do not know what it is that I did to upset you so greatly, but if you would only tell me..."

“That’s plain nonsense, Hannibal. I was there. And I know what happened. Which is obviously how I know that you know. It ain't what you did, it's what you didn't do. So shut up, cause you can’t fix the past but right now…we’re here. Guess I’m stuck with you livin’ a stone’s throw from my house during the holidays..."

He gestured with his nearly empty glass, swallowed another sip as the blush in his cheeks cascaded out to his ears and neck. This was how a captivated Hannibal knew for certain the next words were hard ones for Will to admit.

"And for company I *guess* I could do worse.”

“Could you indeed?” Hannibal’s fallen smile restored itself to glorious abundance.

“Yeah, sure. There’s my ex-husband, for one…and that rabid-lookin’ family of possums that go around eatin’ everyone’s garden on my block and are peculiarly hard to catch.”

Will perused the menu, but Hannibal could tell where his focus really lay: on the man beside him on whom he studiously did *not look* while staring at a menu he’d probably seen plenty of times before.

“Let me see if I have my facts straight,” said Hannibal with a certain playful seriousness. He found a pen left on a check nearby and began writing in fancy cursive on a *That Bar* paper napkin. “It’s…”

He wrote,
*List of the worst possible company:*
*1. Mysterious but clearly nefarious ex-husband*
*2. Crime syndicate family of rodents who foam at the mouth*
*3. Me*

“That’s about right,” Will nodded, repressing a laugh by feigning a cough. “You want seafood? Salad? *Sandwiches?*”

“Who’s the one making ‘call-back’ remarks now? You can choose what to order, my dear, so long as you finally let me pay.”

“Ugh, fine.” Will bit his lip and kept looking anywhere but Hannibal’s face until Delta returned and he placed an order for crab cakes, a large house salad, barbecue shrimp and homemade chips.

“That won't pair well with another round of whiskies,” she noted. “Hmm, how about a couple of Saint Nick-aritas for you boys?” She winked. “Not to hazard a guess on your secret holiday sweetheart, Dr. Lecter, but...is this an impromptu date night? Don’t worry, I won’t breathe a word to Jenna, although she may draw her own conclusions.”

“She often does,” said Hannibal, finally finding Will’s eyes turning his way in another moment of remembrance.

Their secret romance had been in constant danger of discovery from Jenna’s then still-developing skills as self-appointed local gossip queen slash private investigator. All told, it was probably best for anyone who ever had a secret that she was here tending bar and not working for the federal government. Still, Hannibal could see the appeal of the job for Jenna: a nonstop all-she-could-eat buffet of gossip and tawdry affairs glimpsed on the dancefloor, a steady income, it kept her busy, and had a far more limber schedule.

“It’s not a date,” said Will at the same time Hannibal announced cheerfully, “It is a date.”

“Not a date, Will? After you come in here, stormin' and rantin' bout some annoying ex who you won't shut up about? And now there's a handsome man from the past beside you and you're tryin' to say it's what, a resentment reunion? You keep on tellin’ yourself that, honey. I’m pretty sure Chantilly Rae over there’s gonna be cryin’ into her snowdrop martini if you keep flirtin’ up a storm with this one.” She winked at Hannibal.

“I was *not.*”

“Don’t kid a kidder, babe. And she’s sittin’ right next to Waylon Sterlings? It’s a right old ‘Will Graham Broke My Heart’ club. They must’ve bonded, huh?”

“For God’s sake,” Will sighed, “I didn’t break either of their hearts, for the record.”

“It’s okay, Will, I’m the last one on God’s green earth’s gonna judge you for a trail of romantic damage. I think you’re almost the only hot guy in town I haven’t dated, mostly because you always seemed like kid brother material.”

“We’re the same age, but thanks,” Will chuckled. “We’ll take the margaritas, then, I guess.”

"Two Saint Nickaritas," she muttered, her voice automatically going louder when she turned around to her co-manager and asked, "Jenna, where in Sam Hill are those extra candy cane margarita glasses? I could have *sworn* we put them in the dishwasher and they should be done."

"We used 'em all, but I think that drink'll look pretty in a short glass," proposed Jenna.

Jenna let her gaze fall on Will and Hannibal. She winked, false eyelashes under cat-eye glasses. In addition to a tied-off red and green flannel shirt and cut-off jean shorts, she wore two neat, light brown pigtails just as Hannibal remembered. And he wondered if he, too, looked like a strange, oversized version of his past teenaged self while *seriously* hoping not. He'd been gangly and petulant.

Will, on the other hand, was perfect at any age. Everyone noticed, including Jenna, who seemed to appraise them both positively with her silent but suggestive green eyes before saying in a purr, "Welcome back, Dr. Hannibal Lecter. I see you ain't wasted no time in--"

"Thank you, Jenna, could we get those drinks when you get a chance?" Will asked through his teeth.

"Sure, you got it. But don't forget what Sting said...*'I'll be watchin' you,'* " she crooned, bopping her hips to the melody in her head, relatively on key despite clashing with the song playing from the jukebox.

There were plenty of other patrons to keep her eagle eyes on, and doubtless plenty of other bad decisions brewing all around the bar this close to Christmas, so she moved on quickly, fixing drinks and plating food in habitual, easy step with Delta.

"Terrifying," Hannibal murmured with an exaggerated wince. He grinned when Will laughed openly.

"Yeah. Definitely."

"Everybody knows everybody here."

"Mmm. Mostly. Has its pros and cons."

“I see you’ve been heavily pursued hereabouts,” Hannibal noted, mildly bothered. He could not feign surprise, however.

“Yes, professor fancy-talk, I have *dated* since the divorce, but all I ever get’s a bunch of awkward first dates where I pretty much wanna high tail it a second after sitting down, and if it’s not that, then it’s the one where I actually like them so they get bored of me. Exciting, huh?”

“What about those two?” Hannibal asked, nodding at the forlorn-looking Chantilly and her equally woeful male companion.

Hannibal gave them a quick once-over and determined them no serious competition to his own planned courtship of Will. The woman was pretty, with glossy black hair that fell in natural curls down to her shoulders; the man handsome in an *obvious* sort of way that Hannibal didn't like. However, neither was prettier nor more handsome than Hannibal -- and they weren't who Will chose to sit with. Hannibal felt approximately as secure as he could in the circumstances.

“Waylon only wanted one thing, and when he got it, he was outta my life with a classic ‘it’s not you, it’s me,’ then he tried texting me again a few months later - no go. Told him where to stick it. Chantilly’s nice enough but we had zero chemistry. They’d be better off with each other, ‘cept I don’t think Waylon’s into women.”

“I’m sure he could find happiness with someone else on your dance card of former paramours,” Hannibal snipped, growing more jealous by the second.

“Maybe so,” Will smiled almost affably. He seemed charmed by Hannibal’s discomfort and barely smothered resentment towards his other lovers.

Hannibal wanted to change the subject. His head felt hot and his fists wanted to curl at the mere thought of Will being in bed with anyone else, and yet the hypocrisy of that was – of course – considerable. All of it felt embarrassing beyond what he felt ready to tolerate when already nervous.

“You mentioned making enemies with the local possums, yet I haven’t heard you refer to a pet dog. I know you always loved dogs and helping out at the local shelters, so I suppose I had imagined you with a large pack of adopted strays.”

“I had a dog, Shelby,” Will explained, melancholy stealing in again. He still looked so young, but his eyes were much older than his age. “She died a few years ago and I never had the heart to replace her.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Hannibal was utterly sincere.

“Thanks. Yeah.” He shrugged, rubbed his jaw, tapped his boot on the lower rung of the barstool. “Plus, I’ve just been so busy between work and the kids…I don’t know, maybe we *can* get a dog sometime. Might bond us while teaching them responsibility.”

Hannibal nodded. “An admirable plan. I’ve inferred that your sadness earlier had something to do with – what are your children’s names? I don’t believe you’ve mentioned.”

“Savannah Jean and Rhett,” Will said quickly, obviously anticipating Hannibal’s look of snobbish amusement. “Shut up. You’re in Louisiana. We don’t get too many *Hannibals* around here, you know.”

“I think they are charming names,” said Hannibal with an arch look, meant to convey he wasn’t a *complete* snob; Will snorted a laugh, unable to repress it this time.

Hannibal's smile was shy every time he made Will laugh; he felt warm in the face and as if his cheeks were glowing.

“I take it," he guessed, "the twins responded poorly to you confronting them about stealing candy from the apothecary.”

“That’s putting it real lightly,” Will sighed.

The food arrived and while they each enjoyed a bit of each item and sipped their festive drinks, Will told Hannibal about the difficulties he’d had in providing a more structured life for his foster kids. He recounted the argument from that afternoon, looking so miserable that Hannibal wished he had the power to move heaven, earth and the distrusting hearts of two fourteen year olds, anything to make it all better.

“Sometimes I think I made a huge mistake takin’ them in,” Will admitted. “What if I’m doing more harm than good, for all three of us? I originally got into this because I know what the system is like – *not* good – and I wanted to help someone in a situation like mine used to be. And S.J., Rhett, they had that hungry, reckless innocence about them. Guess it reminded me of me and I couldn’t stand thinkin’ of them separated and put in two separate sketchy homes.”

“With motives so pure, it stands to reason being placed with you was a vast improvement compared with their other prospects,” Hannibal ventured.

He’d finished eating, licked his lips as there seemed to be a stray crumb, then casually pressed his palms to his thighs as Will’s eyes immediately locked on his mouth and his own heart thundered. They might not be so young anymore, but there was everything hungry and restless in Hannibal that night, lights flicked on in the dark room of his life. He could not believe he had been lucky enough to get this time with Will, only wanted to hold onto the renewed connection as tight as possible.

“I’m…so inexperienced. Out of depth. Overburdened with work and bills, maybe I bit off more than I could chew. I mean, you ever think of having kids?”

Hannibal gave him a small smile. “Not recently.”

“Just imagine you spend your life bending over backwards tryin’ to provide the best possible existence for them. You’re killin’ yourself day and night working and overthinking, worrying. Doing more laundry, Hannibal, than I can truly describe to you. *So much laundry.* It’s as if there’s a hundred of them. So you do all that.” Will pushed his empty plate forward slightly, clearly to provide something to do. “Um, and they end up hating your guts? Seems to me I could have left them alone to land where they may, or I could have taken them and done a shitty job as a dad and it would have gotten me the same result.”

“So, what’s the point of it all?” Hannibal asked softly.

Will stared at the plate and nodded glumly. He swallowed hard and seemed to be fighting tears again.

“I may not be a parent, but I’ve seen more than my fair share of rebellious children in the E.R. I have heard them say the most terrible, upsetting things to their parents, who whether

patient or caring for them as a patient, are already under extreme pressure and anxiety. And do you know the number one reason why these children so often lash out?"

"What?" Will rested his face in his hand, his eyes flickering back and forth between Hannibal and other random sights in the room. He was getting a little more comfortable being there with his ex, but wasn't fully relaxed just yet.

"They're frightened," Hannibal revealed. "Perhaps yours are, too."

"Think so? Wonder why," Will pondered. "Why would Rhett and Savannah Jean be scared? They always seem so fearless, I almost envy them that."

"It could be any number of causes, none of which subpar parenting on your part. Perhaps the worry that you'll abandon them like others have – prompting misbehavior as a rebellion against potentially getting too comfortable."

"I've tried so hard to make them see I want to be in their life for the long run. But I guess to them, it might seem like just words. We've only been living under the same roof for six months. It could take longer."

"There may be a few more storms to weather, Will, but I firmly believe you'll get there in the end. That is, to your happiest of places in life. Your children, a dog or five–"

Will laughed brightly.

"Perhaps even that someone special…"

"See -- there you're takin' it too far." Will took out his phone. "Now that this is workin' again, here, check this out. Here's how Angel Wood looks on a dating app."

Hannibal took the phone, savoring the minuscule contact of their fingers brushing, seeming that easily to send up sparks, fuel for the fire of their unstoppable chemistry which nothing could seem to age.

He studied the usual generic layout of the coupling application, quickly noticing what the problem might be. "There are twelve singles looking for love in your area," he read aloud.

"Yeah. And that's a good week. I could expand the perimeters, but when do I have time to drive thirty miles and back dating? There's enough farmland between Angel Wood and the next town in all directions, it's a damn hike."

"Why do you stay, then?" Hannibal had been genuinely curious about this for a while. "Is it because your oldest, most cherished friends are here?"

"That's part of it, sure. I guess the rest is, I like it here. I'm at home, much as I can be, however little that is. I moved away briefly went I went to college and didn't like it much. Knew I'd set up my shop right here in town – God. Seventeen year old me would think twenty-one year old me must be the biggest idiot. I was so certain I'd shake the dust of this place and never come back. Now I don't know that I'll ever live somewhere else."

Hannibal nodded slowly, taking this information in. Jenna Hathaway sidled over under the pretense of sliding their bill to them, which Hannibal snatched before Will could reach for it.

“Better not live anywhere else, Willy. What in the dickens would we do without your pretty face and all that romantic drama?” Jenna grinned. “Speakin’ of which, we're all super excited to see you back in our neck of the woods, Dr. Lecter.”

“Thank you, Jenna, how hospitable.”

“You know, I always did suspect that the two of you…” She pointed back and forth between them, eyes sparkling and full of *information* on everything that had happened in town since she was old enough to be cognizant of society.

“Were very good friends?” Hannibal put in with a sly smile and pointed look. “In that case, you were right on target in your suspicions. Here you are.”

He had placed his gleaming black credit card on the bill and passed it to her.

"You always were a coy one," she laughed, then stalked off to the register swinging her hips and clicking her heels.

“You could have your pick of companion, that much is clear,” Hannibal mused. “Yet this evening you’ve granted me the incomparable pleasure of your company. I can only hope I’ve offered something in the way of solace.”

“Maybe I don’t want just anybody,” Will said, facing him more directly than he had all night.

Hannibal was struck by the sudden onslaught of so much beauty suddenly focused only on him; Will’s crystal ocean eyes swarmed with fears and mysterious needs. The younger man's lips flexed into an uncertain, somewhat accusing smile.

“Maybe I never have. And maybe you’ve always known that. It’s not like I was subtle, you know.”

“Oh, I remember,” Hannibal chuckled, although his stomach was still a playground for hyperactive butterflies due to Will’s intense look and smoldering words. “It’s hardly lost on me, coming here to see you tonight, sitting as it happens in the very same place as the first time, all those years ago - how the tables have turned.”

“Guess you might think that.” Will looked Hannibal up and down, reevaluating. “Bein’ as you’re chasing me this time and I’m the one putting up resistance. But I don’t know. Could be you can’t really turn the tables when they’re…not the same tables they once were.”

“We may not have changed as much as all that.”

“Your cheeks still turn that same adorable pink color when I say the right thing…or something so wrong it’s right.” Will had let go of substantial amounts of his stress, as if disappearing into this mirage of a non-date soothed his weary spirits.

“I admit I might not have been quite so talented at concealing my attraction to you as I endeavored to appear,” Hannibal chortled, the sound husky and vulnerable.

“I’ll say. You actually weren’t good at it at all, whatsoever. I saw right through you.”

“That does explain how you so easily made mincemeat of my defenses.”

“Are you here tonight tryin’ to do the same to me, twenty years on?” Will raised his eyebrows, his fluctuating smile only growing more sexy and mysterious, which should not be possible.

“I’m not so ambitious.”

Hannibal did his best to remain upright in his seat rather than tumbling to the floor swooning, because Will, stunning and angelic as ever, was looking at him as if he was something to eat and as if Will's craving for whatever that sustenance meant to him – was fathomless. Neverending. Irresistible.

Will nudged Hannibal’s knee with his own, knowing perfectly well how this would confuse the older man with a million tingles and alarm bells, attraction colliding constantly with romantic longing and then the need to be loved in return - all wrapped in a potent nostalgia that was truly flooring.

“Don’t sell yourself short, Doctor. Let’s find out. Are you gonna dance with me or what?”

Hannibal smirked. He stood and made a small bow, then held out his hand to Will as if they would walk over to the dancing area hand in hand. Will looked at his ex's hand with bemusement before sauntering off towards the dance floor.

“We ain’t there yet. Come on over here, Christmas Romeo. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Chapter End Notes

Next: dancing and....???

Thanks for reading! ❤️

# Moment of weakness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"*Let your kiss tear down / My defenses now / I'm not strong enough to care / I didn't mean to fall in love / Or tell you any of my secrets / But you caught me in a moment of weakness*" - Tenille Arts

***

Behind the bar, Jenna Hathaway and Delta Dawn watched the former couple taking the floor and falling easily into a country waltz. The bartenders leaned forward on their elbows, shoulders brushing. This dance might be the talk of the town by morning, and the thought made Hannibal glow with pride.

“Think you can handle this?” Will asked with his arms loosely clasped around Hannibal’s neck as they swayed.

Hannibal held Will’s body in his arms with a surge of yearning, again making him light-headed. His hair had slipped down to fan his forehead in a soft silver fringe; the Christmas lights dappled them each in shimmering rainbows. The music was fragile and soothing, thankfully no candy-plastic carols seemed to be programmed into the jukebox.

He remembered this type of music from his last time in Angel Wood, remembered additionally as he’d avoided it ever since – it reminded him of his Will, this type of soft, sad, heartfelt twangy melody. Music for the heartbroken, music to drink to, to pour one’s heart foolishly into a one night stand or stumble into violence off the power of one’s unbearable melancholy hopelessness.

Will was firm and perfect against him, smelled like heaven even after the evening’s ordeals; a rudimentary clean-up in the men’s room had rendered him subtly in the ivory-and-pine scents which were to be expected. Deeper, much deeper and evoking endless longing was the natural scent of Will’s manly innocence, his own nervousness, notes of citrus balancing the bouquet.

It unearthed imagery of the sweetest, ripest juicy orange slice, aromatic and tart, drowned in vanilla musk. He wanted to drown in Will, as Will had once begged to be submerged in all that Hannibal was.

The reversal of fortune baffled him; the night had apparently bewitched them both. Pauline might call it Christmas magic, Uncle Robertus would most likely call it a humiliating slight to the family name to associate once again with this ‘youthful nameless ruffian’, Charlie would remark of it as ‘a bad idea’ while clucking her tongue; Chiyoh would encourage his happiness and he knew Mischa would do the same. As for Hannibal, he could only breathe and pretend to ignore the ache in his hands to clutch Will more fiercely, to lick into his mouth with fervent passion, back him into that jukebox and–

Well, if anything, Will Graham was certainly the kind of boy who needed to be backed into the nearest random surface to be roughly kissed, groped, tasted and bitten. Then and now.

There was that something else in Will's scent, a gentle remaining hint of the sweat which Hannibal would gladly lick off of his skin before overpowering Will with hot, demanding kisses.

This was the lover who had never fallen from Hannibal's pedestal of wonderment, this anxious, brilliant, funny, sensuous man, this one with the slender waist, the awestruck eyes, the movement of those delicate hips, the temptation to cup and caress that supple ass and tug pretty curls, then nibble plush lips. The honeyed Southern drawl that sounded better than it possibly should, wreaking havoc on him so easily. Hannibal recalled it with vivid accuracy, almost as if he was inside one of his own most passionate dreams of those days.

There were small differences, to be sure – Will's beard and his slightly more muscled form, the tiny creases by his eyes, far smaller than his own. His voice was a bit deeper, had gained more adult authority despite the insecure mood he happened to be mired by that night.

Their age difference still showed, perhaps nearly as much as before, but neither seemed to mind that, exactly…instead it seemed as always an accelerant for the same fire.

"I shall do my utmost to handle it," Hannibal murmured, unable to help how seductive, how suggestive he sounded, his voice a low purr. "Despite how many more creative schemes may be taking hold of my imagination when I hold you in my arms. You were always the most marvelous dancer, Will."

"I got two left feet," Will laughed, self-conscious at the flirty words. "And you know that, too."

"I don't care if you step on my feet. There's no one else I want to dance with. That's what makes you the ideal partner, my dear."

Something in the old, familiar endearment and how it thickened Hannibal's accent when it slid absent-minded from his tongue seemed to catch like hooks on Will's attentive confusion. The younger man stared up at him, hands moist, warm and shaky on Hannibal, the back of his neck and a broad shoulder, testing to feel changes. Feeling along the firm lines of Hannibal's body as if seeking gravity.

"My dear," such simple words but the memories, heavy and sweet as their wild first love – for it had been Hannibal's first love as well.

Their eyes locked, then they both looked at the other's parted, moistened lips, nearly alarmed with arousal and chemistry.

"This is untenable," Hannibal observed, his voice coming out gruffer than he expected.

"You're right, for once."

Will stepped back from Hannibal and it felt to the older man like a layer of his own being had been ripped off, stolen, taken from where it rightfully belonged.

“Why does it feel like we’re the only ones here? Place is packed.” Will’s chest seemed to be rising and falling rather quickly, and he was fidgeting again, roving a hand through his curls, shuffling his feet, awkward, sweet, perfect.

Indeed the cacophony of patrons dancing, talking - often quite loudly - drinking and carousing about as intimately as could be gotten away with did beg the question, in the blur of various stages of drunkenness and revelry all around them, why they were once again all alone, sure as if they were by the edge of the river observed only by the heat of a summer moon determined to encourage their lust.

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Will.” Hannibal shrugged, feeling oddly humbled, a rare moment. “You’ve grown up. And from all I’ve seen you’re a wonderful, loving, kind man who runs a fine business and does all he can for his friends and children. Despite having lost out on love a few times, you’re not cynical, perhaps wanting to be, you haven’t gone there yet.”

“Stop,” Will blushed and scratched behind his ear, “I can’t do this with you. We’ve already done too much. This memory lane comes fully loaded with a dead end, and I’m just about sad enough tonight to go on a joyride.”

“If those are your predictions, then I won’t be of any help to you. You’ve grown up, but I haven’t, not where you’re concerned. I can’t be reasonable about you. I…even *won’t* be reasonable about you. The only way for me to respect your wishes is to keep away. So…I think I had better say goodnight. You have transportation home?”

“I.” Will paused as if he was a video stuck in the middle of an important scene with his brain on the fritz. “Um, sure, Delta or Jenna - I’m sure one of them wouldn’t mind."

“Everyone here loves you. And I can certainly see why.” Hannibal nodded, a little too quickly.

“But. Wait. I don’t know, dammit. I know you’re right that we should stay away from each other. We’re a powder keg and a handful of matches. It’d be stupid.” Will ran his hands over his own face as if trying to rub it clean or instill sanity.

“Obviously.”

“Naturally.”

Hannibal didn’t know what to do with himself; he had to have Will, that night and forever, or he had to go, before he ruined even this tenuous attempt at peace and awkward friendship by saying something bitter. *I’m sure having only eleven other contenders hasn’t made me a viable option.*

“Goodnight,” he said, softly, instead, taking one more look at Will the way one takes one more hit of the most insatiable narcotic swearing it’s the last and they won’t go back to it,

knowing already, deep down, of course they will.

Of course he would. Perhaps rest and reassembly of pride, perhaps…just a bit of fresh air.

Hannibal turned and walked briskly away; even at this emotionally inelegant juncture he was graceful by nature and easily bobbed and weaved through the crowd so that he didn't bump into anyone. It felt like riding a wave through everyone else's happiness and holiday cheer, and he was happy when the wave spat him out into the dense December heat. Happy, and not.

This weather, in winter of all things…out of all the unpleasantries of the situation, this weather was –

"I said, 'wait,'" Will's voice piped up behind him.

He jogged across the parking lot to where Hannibal was standing in the shadows beside his repaired Bentley, cursing the heavens *as one does*. His curly hair bounced, and his face was lovely with the flush of exertion, this time an uplifted flavor of anticipation and risk which once again confused but beguiled Hannibal. This was one wave he could never fight.

"This weather is murder," Hannibal blathered. He supposed that when he heard Will's voice he had rapidly prepared an offhand remark, but it came out in ill timing to Will's own profession. He paused, thinking the heat had baked his mind.

"What?" He stared at Will, the mirage of past love, unattainable, too beautiful to be real.

"I said, and now this is getting silly, I said "I said, 'wait.'" Will sighed and stepped closer, almost back into Hannibal's personal space.

Temptation made Hannibal's mouth water. He let Will continue.

"See, 'cause when we were saying goodnight or goodbye or whatever the *fuck* that mess was in there, somewhere in the midst of all the dumb, confused shit I said, I *also* said – *wait.*"

Hannibal's heart ached so badly he believed it would crack down the middle until the blood of love poisoned him to death from the inside out. He could barely breathe, yet he had to answer.

"Not sure I understand. What is it that you want, Will? If you wanted me to, I'd wait for you, forever. Easily. Please tell me that's what you want because at least then I'd have a…." He gasped back the sudden drive to collapse into tears. "What do you mean?" he repeated tensely.

His key – he'd been clutching it so hard without realizing that it indented his skin and almost cut him. Will smiled, got closer until they could almost share oxygen. He plucked the key from Hannibal's hand and slid it into the older man's pocket.

"Wait," Will murmured, sultry, smoky desire in his voice and deliberate, obsessed intent in his eyes. He pressed his palm to Hannibal's shirt. Tilting his face, positioned ideally for a kiss, he sighed, "What about one night?"

“Yes,” Hannibal agreed, immediately clasping the younger man’s face and leaning down slightly to kiss him.

Their lips were hot and delirious together. Hannibal kept it slow and sensuous but held Will’s face in a near-vice grip, sustained by the knowledge he held the only most precious thing in the entire universe and would only have the chance to do so for one night unless he was even luckier, then luckier again, never catching his breath.

"You're not intoxicated?" he murmured, pleading, somehow to know Will had the clarity to make this choice.

"No, I was a little tipsy before we ate but I'm not now - I know what I'm doing, Hannibal. You?"

"Yes. I know what I'm doing..." Still clasping Will's face commandingly, he let his free hand move down the boy's back until his open palm groped Will's ass.

Will gasped out *"Hannibal..."*

He bit Will's earlobe and added hotly, "I know what I intend to do."

“Ahh, s-so is that okay with you? Ummm. One night,” Will panted, clinging to Hannibal’s polo shirt with trembling, scrambling, gorgeous long fingers, strong hands gone weak. He leaned into Hannibal like beckoning a hurricane.

“No,” Hannibal growled, heaving Will effortlessly onto the Bentley’s hood and kissing him with consuming passions, hands roaming with helpless aggression all over the boy’s sumptuous body in the plain clothing which still set his figure off to startling effect, but which certainly served only one purpose, to be removed the second they were alone.

“But I’ll take whatever you’ll give me,” he whispered into another aching, wet kiss that made his knees weak. “Will.” He pressed their foreheads together.

“Okay. Okay,” Will gave him a few meek, soft, fumbling kisses to his lips, whether meant to calm Hannibal or himself, Will didn't seem to understand.

The line between them became very fuzzy in these moments; the feeling rushed back to Hannibal, and with it uninvited, agonized desperation.

“Okay. Oh, God, you feel so good, I want you, I need you,” Will mumbled, his hands swiping incoherently all over Hannibal’s face, grazing silvered stubble. “But – shit, where are we gonna go? My A.C.’s busted and you’re in a house with, jesus,”

“I’m not picky about locations, as you’ll recall.” Hannibal trailed open-mouthed kisses all over Will’s neck, biting the side in a teasingly brief way before licking at the hollow of his throat, biting his jaw lightly and tasting his stubble, the wonderful taste of Will’s warm skin, the smell of him, their heat. “But I think you’ll find conditions at your house are improved since you left it.”

“You dick,” Will sighed and laughed and groaned, never stopping the frantic movements of his hands and mouth, devouring Hannibal with equal, indefatigable desire, “You hired someone to fix my A.C.?”

“Do you really resent me for it in this very moment?” Hannibal inquired breathily.

He happened to have a hand deep in Will’s curls, and was in between the continued act of rapturously claiming his mouth with enveloping kisses while he held him that way, right where he liked him, his free hand groping at a toned bicep, then teasing those pretty, rosy nipples, already hard. He looked around. The parking lot, thank goodness, was still empty save for them, a round of insane good luck unlikely to continue. He turned back to Will and kissed his chest feverishly through his t-shirt, then ever so slightly bit down where he knew the sensitive nub lay underneath.

Will whined and threw his head back, mouth wide open like an invitation.

“Alright, that’s a solid point,” he sighed, eyelashes fluttering, grabbing at Hannibal’s shirt. “I forgive you.”

Hannibal’s cock strained against his trousers while his head swam with every decadent vision of taking Will apart with pleasure. He felt his restraint completely falling away; he was almost out of control. Will grasped him by the shoulders and pleaded, “take me home, we can’t fuck on the car.”

Hannibal smirked darkly. He picked Will up again because it had simply been too long; he couldn’t wait to throw the boy around more, as nature had obviously intended. Why should they deprive themselves another second? He lifted his ex off the car and set him on his feet to tremble while he wrenched the door open and gestured for Will to get in. Hannibal looked every inch, equally evil and a gentleman.

“Here you are.”

Will stumbled in and sat there shaking and panting. His own cock was equally throbbing and erect under his jeans, and he seemed on the verge of touching himself.

Hannibal got into the driver’s seat and leaned over to Will, pressing an almost sweet kiss to his forehead. “If you think I spoke in jest about fucking you right here against this car, you’re mistaken. So I had better *not* see those pretty hands on yourself while I’m driving. You’ve said you are mine tonight, and I intend to hold you to it. Is that clear?”

Will nodded, letting out another stifled moan. “Yes.”

“What was that?”

“Yes, please.”

Hannibal confidently pulled out of the lot and drove the short journey back to Will’s house as if he wasn’t still falling apart and well past wild to have him.

“Just…don’t expect me to call you daddy again,” Will said in a weak attempt at a joke.

Hannibal tapped impatient fingers on the steering wheel as they paused at one of the few traffic lights in town, one nicknamed “the pink light” because it was so old that it didn’t quite make it to red anymore. He looked at Will intently.

“Challenge accepted,” he said, a bit too lightly.

His eyes again, in the wan streetlights while they drove past all the calm little homes dressed in Christmas, the wildflowers and the picket fences – his eyes were fiercely tender. There was no difference between his love for Will and the lust. He couldn’t control either, and tonight at least he didn’t have to.

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The mattress springs creaked when Hannibal tossed Will onto them while they both started taking their clothes off; he’d been watching, and his boy’s lovely hands hadn’t stopped trying to tear the black t-shirt off and jeans off so he could get skin to skin with his ex-lover, now his lover.

His supple body landed on the soft mattress with a bounce and his fingers fought an ongoing war with the clothes. He had to try not to touch himself sensuously along the way, which Hannibal knew formed its own battle; Will was ever so sensitive, and he had always thrived on obeying the older man’s commands. It was a challenging combination and Hannibal enjoyed watching the struggle.

His hungry eyes glittered darkly. He needed to be able to see just a little more. A quick flick of his own hand produced a small bath of golden light from the nightstand. Will’s angelic features fell into sharp relief like joy unearthed from an eternity of heart-blindness.

Will was moaning, managing to get the shirt off, revealing a built but slender upper body, every pore of him obviously just so sensitive he struggled to summon breath.

“Stop, let me,” Hannibal said mercifully, slowing down in his own frenzy. His heart pounded.

Will had a nice house, organized, neat, pleasantly decorated in rustic, lowkey manly style. The house felt like Will. Hannibal liked it right away, even distracted, when he carried Will inside caveman style, plastering kisses all over his face, still managing to navigate a course towards his room, going on nothing more than the whimpering directions Will confusedly managed to give him.

He climbed onto the bed and hovered above Will, the two of them trembling with need. Hannibal cupped Will’s face, memorizing every detail. His fingers trailed those sweet, kiss-reddened lips and Will opened up, enough for Hannibal to press one thick finger into his mouth and slowly pump it in and out. Will moaned and swirled his tongue eagerly, sucked and gently bit down on the pad of Hannibal’s fingertip.

They gasped, then Will gave a groan of excruciating arousal. “God,” he laughed, a bit embarrassed, “It’s like I’ve never had sex before. I feel like I’m going to burst or shatter.”

He smiled nervously under the gentle lamp light and the added glow of a large full moon since the window behind the bed had its curtains open. The night sky looked like a vast expanse of smooth onyx upon which the heavens had scattered careless handfuls of sparkling sugar - yet not a single star could compare with the light in Will.

In Will's eyes, wide and vulnerable, and in Hannibal's life, under the light of his influence. He felt worthy with Will, even the scared small boy inside him, even the teenager terrorized by his uncle, even they relented into joy when he was with Will. The power of this, the magic of it…felt immense. He felt a panic of happiness that could be snatched from him all over again at any moment.

Perhaps this was why he answered Will's anxious remark by kissing him, slow, wet, deep and claiming, grinding their bodies together so that his full weight was almost entirely pressed against the younger man. Their urgently hard cocks brushed together under their clothes and Will gasped, little breathy moans spilled against Hannibal's relentless kissing.

Will rocked his hips up seeking more friction. Hannibal immediately growled and firmly pinned Will's wrists down. He stared possessively down into those eyes, eyes that shone like pools of liquid blue. Pupils hugely dilated. Will needed it, *badly*, Hannibal could tell. He intended to take such good care of his special boy. He was living for the chance.

"To be clear," Hannibal murmured as he flexed his grip on Will's wrists, noting that the younger man had gone instantly slack and pliant under his domination, finding himself very pleased at this. "Is this happening?"

"Fuck," Will rolled his eyes, breathing hard, "I'm going to kill you."

"Not if I kill you first," Hannibal smirked.

He rubbed against Will's dick again, then kissed his mouth roughly, sucking on his lower lip. "You're too divine," he said in a voice gone gravelly with emotion.

"Shhh, don't be serious, whatever you do." Will frowned, "I don't want to think. This isn't about thinking – this is to get away from thinking."

"You don't want me to tell you I love you," Hannibal nodded. He straddled Will and sat up to pull his own shirt over his head, showing off a chest full of soft curls now gone silver.

Will trembled at the sight of him at this angle, looking so big, strong and intimidating. He shook his head.

"Don't talk, don't ever speak again, shut up and lay me down right now, make love to me like the world is burning all around us and we don't even care. Shut up, please, please–"

"You beg so prettily for an impetuous, naughty boy." Hannibal grinned, his fangs looking wolfish. Expertly, he ground his cock against Will's again, the hot, hard flesh of them demanding to be free with nothing between them. Will threw his head back. Distracted by the urge to go on groping all over Will's body, Hannibal had released his hold on the boy's

wrists. Rebellious, Will reached for his own chest again and Hannibal shook his head with a sterner smile. “What did Daddy say about touching yourself, my dear?”

Will settled for tugging impatiently at his own hair as he pouted. “I think *I* said I’m not calling you Daddy, and I’m pretty sure I asked you to shut up and fuck me."

“Don’t speak at all?” Hannibal lifted his light brows teasingly, feeling smug.

“Fuck, oh God, okay, you can speak…I want your goddamn obnoxious sexy smoky voice. Just. Dirty talk and moaning, that’s it–”

“I want you.” Hannibal undid his own trousers, then Will’s.

He jerked his pants and underwear down in one disorganized bundle and tossed them to the floor before sliding Will’s down to free the boy’s cock, bulging with arousal which had beaded the tip with pearly white drops. Will quivered, nipples hard, teeth worrying his bottom lip.

“I’m dying. Please, please–”

He climbed back up the bed and seized Will’s face, pressing another long and searing kiss to the younger man’s soft, overbitten mouth. Their tongues swept together as thrills skated down Hannibal’s spine. He nipped Will’s earlobe, still in love with those cute elven ears and how they looked under clusters of curls. His hot breath poured into Will’s ear, then down his neck, always an especially sensitive area.

“Want you, perfect boy. I’ll tell you you’re beautiful as many times as I like. Don’t forget who’s in charge here, who you need to be in charge.”

His words came tight, gritted against that vulnerable, lovely skin he was kissing, licking at, finally biting down hard so that Will’s hips bucked.

“H-Hannibal – I need…please, I can’t wait, please…”

“I want to be in you so deep, fucking you so hard that you forget what it means to be sad. You can’t remember anything else but pleasure and pain and surrender and heat, and our bodies colliding *all* night–”

“I’m literally gonna come from your voice, jesus fucking christ, Hannibal,”

A slow yet serious smile played about Hannibal’s lips as he kissed a warm, wet path down Will’s body, licking and biting one nipple while playing with the other, twisting and tugging lightly.

“Oh, *fuck,* how is your mouth that good?” Will was incredulous even in the throes of immense pleasure which Hannibal considered merely a small indication of what he intended to give.

Hannibal enjoyed that too, the crumbling of Will’s defenses, the luminosity of him helpless to desire under his own control. He triumphed in it as his lust darkened.

He bit his way down Will's torso, licking and kissing the bumps where he felt ribs under smooth skin, nibbling at the adorable tummy and licking into Will's belly button, clutching his hips.

"I'm w-warning you, I'm about to explode all over you before we even get a chance for actual sex!" Will shuddered, restless.

It had obviously been far too long since someone had made love to this boy properly. Will needed a firm, strong hand to hold him down and overpower his ceaseless anxieties of overthinking, overfeeling, too sensitive and intimidated by life's myriad sensations, too hard on himself always.

"Then go ahead and come, my dear. I give you permission this time. The night is young…" He looked up at Will, his own hair falling down across his eye, sweat clinging to his skin, muscular frame tensed with the same arousal that had his thick cock *throbbing* for his boy, to be seated deep inside heaven itself, heaven himself.

"Hannibal, I uh…forgot to tell you…probably because I was avoiding the subject aggressively, ummm…"

Will was back to his nervousness and fidgeting. Hannibal tightened his grip on the pretty, slender hips and murmured soothingly, though his tone was gritty and low, "Hold still for me. Relax. I'm here. I'm going to take care of you now, baby, there's nothing to worry about."

Then he let go of Will's hips, intending to lower his mouth along the trail to the boy's most gorgeously evident desire, and finally noticed the tattoo from That Summer.

He lost his breath and started smothering the tattoo with kisses and soft bites. He licked at his name on Will's skin, carved and painted permanently, ecstatic, euphoric, he mouthed at Will like an animal. "My good boy…"

"I don't wanna talk about it, please, just…" Will sighed, perplexed, clearly, at his own reason for not covering the cursive name *Hannibal* which still scrolled across his beautiful hip, bookended on either side with a fairly elaborate, romantic-looking Victorian key. "I don't know why I kept it."

*because you have the key to my heart,* Will had gushed that night, twenty years ago when he came to Hannibal with reddened skin, bringing in his overnight bag ibuprofen and an ice pack, pretending it hurt less than it did. But he thrived on this sort of pain, the kind that bound them, Hannibal knew that.

It would have been *so easy* to simply have the local tattoo artist connect the key, covering up the *Hannibal* part as if it was never there. Hiding the memory of their love. Will hadn't done that.

"It doesn't matter why you kept it, sweetheart, you kept it." Hannibal left it at that, rapturously kissing Will's curvy thighs and biting them to leave more marks on his favorite territory.

Will had not changed in his loud and uncontrollable responses to his lover's teeth; his cries were wild and made him blush at his own shamelessness.

"How I've missed those sounds," Hannibal marveled as the cries and moans made his heartbeat gallop.

"Sweet boy, now can't you relax for me?" He swept his large, strong hands up and down Will's thighs, briefly sliding them over the soft shape of that perfect little round ass. "There, now, baby."

Will had made an effort and let his breathing even slightly, his limbs becoming steadier, though not for long. He had centered his being around the pleasure he was to receive from Hannibal's worshipful mouth and hands.

"Such a beautiful boy, such a good boy." Hannibal loved to praise Will and watch how shy, how overwhelmed and turned on he became.

He finally touched Will's cock with his lips, again teasing, tentative, letting the attention build and build. He licked the precum from the tip and all along the sides of Will's substantial hard-on, then gave a single firm stroke from base back up to tip, enjoying the easy glide from the lubrication of the boy's desire.

"Daddy!" Will blurted as his whole body started to shake again. "Daddy, daddy, daddy, please…"

"Yes, sweetheart," Hannibal sighed, the statement a promise. His heart swelled unbearably at hearing that name for him again.

Enveloping Will's engorged cock with his eager lips, Hannibal started to suck in earnest, his fingers playing with the boy's balls at the same time, firm and targeted little squeezes that had Will's bare toes digging into the sheets. He covered Will with his spit while lapping and sucking, increasing the speed and intensity.

Will muttered, "Fuck, oh my God," eyes squeezed shut and hand clamped hotly in Hannibal's soft hair, tangled in silver and trembling.

He moved his hips and started fucking rhymically into the tight heat all around him. Hannibal let this happen, he wanted his throat violated hard by Will's aimless, selfish lust, he would die for this one chance.

He wanted to give every ounce of his strength and ability to Will; as the boy pumped deeper into his mouth and over his tongue, the glorious erection finally hitting the back of his throat, Hannibal realized in a fierce blur of emotion that he was trying to prove physically what he'd been asked not to say in words.

Perhaps, especially as his resistance to the daddy kink had died so soon despite his stubborn resolve, Will had attempted to show strong stamina and not come for a while, but Hannibal was determined that should be a losing battle.

Knowingly, he let Will fuck his mouth with increasing abandon, and then he played with Will's ass, squeezing the soft cheeks, trailing a finger between them, barely touching his hole.

Delighted, he felt Will's cock stiffen, then with a small jerk, release into his mouth, the cum pouring exultantly over his waiting tongue, some of it dripping right down his throat as Will began thrusting again with wanton grunts and moans, riding out his pleasure.

*Oh. This is going to be a long night.*

Now that he had Will right where he wanted him, Hannibal waited for him to finish, cursing and fisting at Hannibal's hair, adorable feet sliding down the bed, and at the very moment when the orgasm just started to ebb, he slowly released Will's cock from his mouth, took a few deep breaths, looked up at Will's red, pleasure-addled face with ferocious intention. Then he buried his face in Will's ass.

"You– you can't just – fuck!" Will lost the power of speech as Hannibal laved his eager tongue against that tight, pretty hole.

He made Will very wet with excessive kissing, lapping, sucking, his happiness knowing no bounds. The taste of Will made him wild for more. Desperate to be inside his body thrusting hard, then *harder*.

He pressed the tip of his tongue into Will's hole and relished the soft, broken cries this evoked from the sweet boy who was laid out before him for the taking, a ravishing, exquisite beauty. One finger, then a second pressed into Will and fucked with devastating, slow, deepening pressure. It wasn't a questioning thrust for a delicate virgin; this was a demand, this was a reminder who Will belonged to. Hannibal felt half-crazed with the need to make it known again and again, distracted too by the clenching heat that was Will on the inside, where he was soft and yearning and increasingly open.

"Look how well you take Daddy's fingers, my dear," Hannibal murmured, that animal glint still blazing in his eyes. "Like the good boy you are."

"Want to…be a good boy for you," Will whispered, returning the worship he received in equally ardent measure.

After carrying on like this for so long that lube was barely necessary, Hannibal grabbed the bottle from Will's trembling outstretched hand. The boy had managed the bedside table drawer when Hannibal lifted his mouth and knelt above him, slowly stroking his rigid manhood.

The older man shivered, almost winced with the need that overcame him; he couldn't recall ever being this hard, although he probably had been when he was with Will before. No one else did *this* to him, made his cock so thick and heavy, dripping, flushed dark pink with need, and no one else was going to get from him what he gave Will that night.

"If we have only one night, Will, I'm not wasting a second." He devoured Will's lips with passionate kisses, then whispered intently, "Wrap your legs around me and hold onto me tight, baby."

Will nodded, moaning “Daddy,” and locked his legs snugly around his lover’s broader body, his fingers pressing into Hannibal’s powerful back.

"Will?" Hannibal's breathy, affectionate chuckle carried the same warning as the gentle darkness raging in his eyes. "Don't expect me to spare you, either. Take a deep breath."

Hannibal kept it equal parts rough and sweet, both emboldened and considerate of Will's building, ragged cries, the sucked in breath followed by a punch of a gasp as he was firmly penetrated, Hannibal's cock *so* much to take, so much more than even his three big fingers twisting in to prepare him.

The older man entered Will gradually, groaning at the shock of bliss while his cock was slowly pulled into that velvet heat so that they were one. Holding onto the back of Will’s head with firm command, he played with a blushing, hard nipple with his other, kissing Will’s mouth between moments of staring into those angel eyes, breathless. In disbelief.

Finally, he was buried to the hilt, Will letting out a sound that was nearly a scream; Hannibal was huge and Will still so very tight, but he’d been careful, had used so much lube the sheets were soaked with it, so much that every slow, starting-out thrust made a slick sliding noise, and Will was perfectly fine, physically, just lost in the throes of shocking pleasure. Just finally whole again.

Hannibal gasped then, because Will’s hands had moved down to spread his own ass even more open. Will was getting unreasonable, greedy, trying to make sure that every inch was shoved into him.

"Insatiable thing," Hannibal accused in a gravelly voice.

He thrust more firmly and hit Will’s prostate right away, drowning in the boy’s hapless, needy cries. Will hooked his arms around his knees and held himself like that, a clear invitation for what he received in moments of the gesture.

“Harder?” Hannibal asked, mischievous yet severe.

“Yes, daddy, please.” Will smiled and relaxed his body into the bed.

Here, tonight, Will was loved and adored, called perfect and beautiful countless times while unbelievable pleasure was poured into and all over him for hours. His mind was vacant of any other concern but giving his body to Hannibal. Here, he wasn’t a disappointment, a bad guardian. There weren’t any late bills and nothing in or about his home was broken. Will did not have to lift a finger and there was no hard work, only the effort of accepting pure affection and the intensity of Hannibal’s passion. He only had to lay there and let the rest of the world go away.

Hannibal snapped his hips at Will’s request and rewarded his receptiveness with a round of hard fucking, breathlessly pausing with his forehead again meeting Will’s.

Will was breathing hectically while tears of pleasured overexertion poured down his face. Hannibal panted above him and sighed, lips sinking down to press to his own, “It’s alright,

baby, I have you, I'm here. Tell me honestly…do you need it harder?"

"Yes, daddy." Will was delirious but certain.

Hannibal stroked his thighs, kissed his neck, nosing into his skin, then biting. "Then I need you to roll over for me."

This done, he grabbed Will's hips, stroking the place where his name was forever inscribed. He slid back inside with such ease it took his breath away as they both groaned loudly, and then he started riding Will with ruthless, almost brutal abandon, the profane sound of skin slapping hard against skin over and over driving him wilder. "Is that what you need? What you like?"

"Yes, oh, God, yes, just like that, right there." Will was a vision; his face red and his eyes dripping tears, his hands clutching the sheets, presenting his ass by pushing it higher. "Right there, please, Daddy. Feels so good…"

He didn't say he loved Will, even as the words built along with the steady, rough pounding he gave the beautiful boy who surrendered to him. He held it back but held back nothing of himself.

"I want to feel you come in me," Will begged raggedly, "Mark me, make me…*yours*."

Hannibal moaned huskily and let the ecstasy in his body rise to a more definitive point.

When it was very close he gasped to Will in a raw, bone-deep way, "Touch yourself, come with me."

Will's hand worked over his cock with firm, quickening strokes, and when he came he fell forward onto his palms, mouth dropped open in moaning shock. Hannibal felt it almost harder than he felt his own earth-shaking orgasm because it mattered more that Will felt pleasure. He wondered if he could keep breathing another day in his life without Will's hips between his hands and the shuddering, moaning falling apart into bliss which had overtaken the beautiful boy's woe.

Insistently, he grabbed Will's hips and yanked him back up, sliding Hannibal's cock all the way back in as the older man dragged out their mutual release with a few more pummeling thrusts. With several sharp spanks to Will's ass, Hannibal felt his cum spilling deep inside his lover while his hips gave another desperate spasm. Obsessively, he snarled and cursed wildly in Lithuanian, pulling Will upright kneeling in front of him. He bit the boy's neck while his other hand pressed to Will's flat, warm stomach, *making* Will feel the profundity of it all, how much thick cock was buried that deep in him, along the with the warm spread of seed.

"Feel good?" Hannibal asked, heart racing. He clutched Will's body even tighter against his own. "Is it what you need?"

*Am I what you need?*

"Yes," Will sighed, smiling dreamily. He slipped his quivering hand into Hannibal's sweaty silver locks to encourage his lover's mouth, his tongue and teeth on the vulnerable, soft skin of his neck. "Yes, it's everything I...ever needed."

Relief nearly overpowered Hannibal.

But Will's restored happiness only lasted a minute. Only until Hannibal gently, tenderly withdrew from him, kissing his back, stroking his arms. Will, trembling and covering his face, curled up on his side and cried. Hannibal, panting and dizzy with a wild mixture of buzzing residual pleasure and desperate, pained adoration, lay down beside him oddly afraid to touch. How strange that he should fear the wrong touch when Will was so fragile might make the younger man run from his arms again, so frightening to have this thought when mere minutes ago, he'd been that deep inside of Will.

He had no explanation for the fear; it was just him and Will and the history, it was wherever it left them. He felt shipwrecked.

"Can I do anything?" he asked in a hushed tone, lingering beside Will patiently, but not pushing for cuddles.

He stared at Will's back, naked and vulnerable. His eyes traveled slowly, reverently over the boy's form: the fluffy, disheveled curls atop his head, delicate spine, the beautiful curves of his ass, his strong but pretty legs and feet. Wishing he could soak up the warmth of Will from the sheets he lay on and wrap it around him, along with the scent of his lover, and keep it if he was to lose Will again. Just to keep that much – could it possibly be asking too much?

"Everything makes me sad." Will lamented. He rolled over and stared at Hannibal with the biggest and bluest eyes. "I don't think there's anything to do about it. You make me sad, and it makes me want you to touch me. Over and over. I want the way you make me sad. I'm..how does a person feel other things?"

"I don't know."

"Really?" Will sniffled.

He nudged his body a little closer to Hannibal's. In the dim room, as the evening had darkened outside and spilt its shadows further into their space like a protective blanket, Will looked seventeen again.

"I've not found much happiness in life," Hannibal acknowledged, but not glumly.

His eyes were still alight with the hope Will feared to touch, and he refused to surrender the hope until it was definitively snuffed out. Perhaps even then, he would far prefer to cherish the fantasy Will would someday be his.

Not reaching out with his hands, he allowed his gaze to trail longing caresses on Will, framing his face, tracing his jaw, kissing his cheeks and lips. Will felt it, even silently. He bit his lip. He moved closer.

“But you still think maybe you’ll have…a real life happily ever after someday?”

“Curious boy,” Hannibal laughed softly, infinitely affectionate. “I yearn for it but I don’t depend upon it. And I live in my world everyday, thinking of other worlds, even alternate dimensions where I made better choices at the right moments for my life to go differently.”

“That’s sad. The dreaming for what might never happen.”

“Not if one is naive enough to think that dreams come true.”

Will scanned his face, lost in fascinated study of his lover’s chiseled features. He seemed to be seeking the meaning of existence, as if it was etched into Hannibal’s skin, written on his body, living in his eyes.

“You think dreams come true?”

Hannibal pulled a face, expressing awkward uncertainty. Will let out a wild, short laugh and another few tears rolled down his face.

“I would *like* to think they come true, Will. I’d like to think I’m not dreaming now, here with you. And…perhaps in my past life I’ve been too jaded, too hesitant to believe in the fantastical, a notion so outrageous as day to day contentment and joy.”

“Your love isn’t content,” Will corrected him. “It wouldn’t be, even happy.”

Hannibal pressed his lips together, considering. “By content, I didn’t mean that my love would be *calm*.”

Will closed the distance between them, shakily reaching up to cup his lover’s face, feeling his stubble and defined cheekbones, shivering at the sensations of mapping the older man, deciding if their paths should merge into one or if they had better remain on independent, sensible and likely roads.

“Do you ever think about…the first night, at the bar, and after…in the phone booth?” Will was positively *marveling* at Hannibal now, gazing and gazing, stroking the older man’s face slowly until Hannibal closed his eyes, swallowing at the powerful sensitivity he had to Will’s touch, to Will’s hands and desire. To belong to Will, that was the dream.

“Will,” Hannibal responded with a sensuous tension in his voice, with his hand curved to travel down his lover’s body, knuckles coasting over his arm, his chest, his side and ending on his thigh with a light squeeze which nonetheless conveyed endless *wanting*.

Will made no objection, instead moaning as his dark lashes fluttered; he mouthed the word “please,” too shy or prideful, or both, to cry it out again. Yet.

Hannibal slid his body over Will’s, once more holding the younger man’s wrists down firmly on the sheets. Will’s breathing evened out; his sighs became trusting rather than panicked. He needed this, Hannibal’s controlling hands, his domination. He needed to feel safe for once.

*I would make you feel safe forever.*

Again, he chose to let his body talk, telling these words to Will with a slow and deepening kiss, the ravishing sweep and plunder of his tongue in Will's mouth, with his powerful form tight on top of Will, protecting him from absolutely everything he feared.

"Will," he murmured, kissing Will's neck, licking delicately the places he'd already left light purple and bruising, teasing his teeth again on the indentations of the harder bites he'd used to mark his boy.

Will was coming undone so beautifully, gasping and whispering, "Need you."

Hannibal clarified emphatically, "I think about that night all the time."

With that, he bore down on Will in a wave of passion that startled him even despite his culmination of impossible, soul-engulfed need. Will could do nothing but give into the swirling, clutching wave. He wrapped his arms and legs tight around Hannibal, crying, laughing together, moaning and sharing breath, neither knowing when lovemaking had eventually slipped into a sleepy embrace.

Chapter End Notes

I mean I wasn't there but *I'm* exhausted! 😅

**Next time:** back to the past. What happened next between naughty, teasing younger!Will and protective, trying-to-be-decent Hannibal?

My socials, where you can read much more about my writing and follow to share rants about Hannigram! 🥰
**Twitter**: https://twitter.com/earthsickwoyou
**Tumblr**: https://earthsickwithoutyou.tumblr.com

# Love Makes Me

Chapter Notes

> cw: brief references to self-harm, child abuse and drug use. This chapter is also where the "underage" tag comes in more directly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*“If we’d never met until now … I wonder if you’d even notice me.”*
*“It would be impossible not to notice you, Caroline. Your essence would hover around me. Harangue me until I did.” -The Originals*

*I try my best to behave*
*And I can't help feelin' this way*
*It's not my fault so don't blame me*
*'Cause love makes me* -Hunter Hayes

***

**Hannibal.**
**Then.**

Hannibal had never been sure of his own complete sanity ever since psychology and mental health had been introduced to him as concepts, somewhere in his youth or childhood.

A significant interest in human physiology in adulthood made psychology more than a passing interest. And in his deeper studies during college, Hannibal encountered ominously familiar contexts each time he learned more about various disorders, challenges, delusions and traumas of the human mind.

It was certainly not healthy to do many of the things he did to himself on a regular basis, from the excessive studying and working to the late-night rebellious escapades to the secret habit of cutting. Worst of all, his constant attempts to prove himself to his uncle who would always despise him and think him pathetic. That was the definition of insanity: running into the brick wall of Robertus’ disdain and even abuse of him, thinking *one of these times, one of these times, I’ll get it right.*

So being crazy was something Hannibal already knew about.

Yet, at this particular moment, standing outside the *Tipsy Tap* trying in the name of all things sensible and safe to stop caring deeply about, admiring excessively, and paying undue attention to – one seventeen year old *brat* with big blue eyes and a buttery southern accent, Hannibal had never felt so insane.

What was he supposed to do? If he walked away, any number of calamities might befall his innocent young friend in such a disreputable establishment.

Then again, Hannibal *was* a calamity. Was it fair to impose his potentially damaging presence longer than need be, on this impressionable boy who wrongly thought he hung the moon?

At least Hannibal knew the nature and likely outcomes of himself at his worst, at his most calamitous. Yet he could not predict what sort of ruffians might be drinking in that decidedly unsavory looking place, nowhere near a nice enough place for a lovely young man like Will. Nobody particularly nice could be in there, except for his wild and endlessly frustrating boy.

*He's not mine.* The words fell off his resolve like a bandaid that wouldn't stick. Cursing under his breath, he used his knuckles to push open the rough wooden door and enter the bar, where the scene within was just as he had feared.

He had too much of the Lecter snobbery in him to approve of such a place with its "backroads hick" aesthetic, but as a frequent gambler and partaker of the dangerous fine line between law-abiding citizen and reckless trouble-maker, Hannibal had been in his share of rough and tumble situations.

He was ready to do whatever he must to protect Will, remaining focused even as he got a few quick winks and catcalls from the women he walked past. He had tunnel vision and barely acknowledged them, leaving a trail of "awwww" and "what's *his* problem" in his wake.

Under normal circumstances, Baltimore-Hannibal would absolutely flirt with the attractive young women and then take one or more of them home to fuck in his uncle's house, mainly to anger his uncle but partly because the blur of pleasure often helped – temporarily – to blot the pain of his ongoing struggles.

But Angel Wood-Hannibal was someone new, and Hannibal was just getting to know himself when he was in this strange place, this corner of the world suffocated in wildflowers and lust. He wanted. He wanted, for the first time in so long that he could taste it, sweet and lush as the smell of fresh vanilla wafting from those blue mistflowers that grew in abundance all along the roads, especially the closer one got to the river.

He was getting drunk on being this person who felt things again, felt love, attraction, *worried* and longing for someone he couldn't have, but still, oh God! Just to feel. To feel.

In Angel Wood Hannibal had no interest in showing off, proving himself, hurting himself or others to make himself feel better. He just wanted to find Will. That was all he was ever going to want, and knowing this hurt as much as it excited him, the *feeling,* warm and jumping in his heart and stomach, making his heart race and thrumming through his skin. He realized he must have been like a robot or a zombie for years of numb pessimism before seeing this impossible boy.

A boy he would look for, protect and adore, quiet and unspoken as his feelings must be. Oh, that he could believe he would continue to keep that level of self-control. It eroded like a cliff face eaten alive slowly by a ravenous ocean every time he set eyes on Will, and they had only

seen each other a handful of times. Why did it feel as if he had never known anyone better, that no one else could possibly matter?

His instincts flared in some kind of possessive frenzy, scanning the small but crowded bar for the one face that *mattered*.

A difficult task, finding Will with the dim lighting, due to an excess of cigarette smoke, a loud and jarring combination of raucous talking, arguing, laughing, pool balls clacking, and bartenders practically howling over the noise to confirm patrons' orders. But find him Hannibal did, upon which his lips twisted in a disapproving scowl.

There was his – there was that absurd boy, the one with skinny legs but shapely thighs, *that ass* which Hannibal tried and failed not to stare at, that awkward "mature" expression he tried to keep on his face while he handed a few dollars to the bartender, receiving a bottle of beer in return.

A stormcloud seemed to hover, simmering in complicated annoyance, over Hannibal's head. He'd been in his share of vile, unsavory places from basements full of contraband to drug dens and brothels, merely as a traveler, observer, and dabbler in the art of risk. But suddenly, this relatively typical, comparatively innocuous little small town bar seemed like hell itself, seething with dangers as the eyes of many patrons had now been diverted to the beautiful boy who looked out of place.

He wanted to punch them all. Instead, he squared his shoulders, jaw tense, hands fisting and unfisting, and went to Will at the barstool, far end of the bar where he could practice looking casual and acting as if he actually liked the taste of the terrible, cheap beer he had acquired.

"What're you doing here?" Will asked lazily, barely looking in Hannibal's direction.

"What do you think you're doing, exactly?" Hannibal snapped. He took the beer away and set it on the other side of him, out of Will's reach.

"Hey," Will complained, rolling his eyes when his voice broke. They could barely hear each other over the music and shenanigans of the bar. "Give it back. And go away, I'm busy."

"Are you trying to convince me –" Hannibal moved in closer because Will was now using the loud place as a way to try to escape the scolding he thoroughly deserved.

With his face, his mouth and breath altogether too close to the boy's warm skin, *perfect-soft-pale-pretty skin*, he felt close to losing even more control. Will thought Hannibal was so sophisticated and brilliant, and meanwhile he had this amazingly spectacular young surgeon in the palm of his hand. Hannibal felt little better than a toy in Will's presence, willing to be played with and even broken, so long as Will paid him attention, touched him.

He remained calm, despite the smell of low-key, but pleasant soap lingering on those gorgeous curls from the shower Will must have had before the meeting, and the cute intake of breath from the boy who had not, apparently, expected this reaction.

“Are you trying to convince me,” Hannibal repeated firmly, so close that Will couldn’t evade the words, “That you came into this heathen’s lair to get away from me and encourage my departure? Hmm? It’s perfectly obvious you thought I’d worry about you and chase you around in here, or drop my defenses and make love to you in the middle of that peanut-shell infested excuse for a dancefloor–”

“You wish,” Will retorted, only it came out as a whisper because their faces were so close.

When he turned his face from scowling at the wall to looking at the man beside him, Will’s eyes fell directly onto Hannibal’s, and they seemed to fall into each other. Possibly never to return to themselves again as separate people.

Will’s mouth dropped open, and his eyes moved from Hannibal’s eyes to his lips. He fluttered his dark lashes and just hovered there.

Desire spiked, hot and insistent in Hannibal, nervousness in his stomach, heat prickling all over his skin as tension began to sing of imminent pleasure in his low belly, traveling down to his cock with a twinge and slight thickening.

Hannibal *did* wish, actually, and it was sending him into plain, unmistakable madness. This close to Will, he was dizzy and his body had too much power over his thoughts and impulses. He didn’t think he’d ever felt so drunk without having a single drop of alcohol.

Will’s cheeks got three shades redder when Hannibal said “*make love.*”

Hannibal wanted to bend him over the bar. Will, with his innocent eyes that Hannibal hoped he always had, that he hoped life didn’t make into cynical ones like his own, Will with his pert, soft, perfect little body without knowing it, thinking Hannibal was out of his league.

Hannibal wanted to kiss him until their lips were numb. He told himself he wanted to kill the temptation and be good for once, save Will from any danger, including himself. To be who Will needed instead of the version of himself – more genuine – that they both wanted him to be right now.

“Do *you* actually expect *me* to believe,” Will continued, carefully tilting his face just shy of Hannibal’s aching lips, teasing him with his breath so close, Will’s lips wet from the nervous lick he’d just given them. “That you came into this *heathen’s lair* because you’re an earnest and upright man who is going to talk some sense into a wayward teenager?”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal answered angrily, very angrily, he tried to, but unfortunately it sounded a bit soft and bruised. “That is, yes.”

“Yes?” Will asked, raising his eyebrows. “Are you sure? You don’t want to *kiss me*? That’s not why you followed me here?”

“I can’t kiss you. I can’t even be your friend without leading us both into temptation, that’s obvious.” This had apparently become *the script*, and even to his own ears it had begun to sound less convincing, if at all. He glared at Will, forcing himself to back up slightly with a

craving still in him like a knife lingering in a stab victim's skin. Holding it in was getting harder. Soon it would be too hard. But he couldn't leave Will there.

"I can, however, rescue you from this latest misstep," he went on with some difficulty, voice thick with lust that he could not quite conceal.

When conversing with someone, surely there were other places to look aside from bright blue, heavenly eyes with long angelic lashes, teasing eyebrows, adorable nose, equally adorable ears, pretty curls, sensuous flesh exposed in too many places and – he could not seem to focus on any part of the boy that maintained the discussion without deepening his desire–

He tried looking at the wall over Will's shoulder as he continued sternly, "Come with me, and no one need hear about this transgression."

"This transgression, Saint Dr. Hannibal?" Will laughed darkly, really annoyed now. He leaned back from the bar, flexing his arms and making a firm bicep stand out under his shirt.

Hannibal's mouth watered. "I only mean that…"

"You gonna tell on me, hmm? Tell the bartender, get the half-asleep local cop over here to spout some tired speech about teen drinking, maybe sit me in a cell to learn me for a few hours? They can call home all they want. Earl's not comin' home till tomorrow night if he bothers being that prompt, and I'll delete any messages on the answering machine well before then. Are you really gonna be that uncool anyway? Narc out on me?"

Hannibal's eyes narrowed and his lip curled, offended. "Narc?"

"Whaddaya want me to call you instead…" Will leaned back on the chair, far too ravishing to be believed. He was like a diamond against the ruddiest swamp dirt, impossible to ignore. "You've pretty much cut off every attempt I've made to be any more intimate, *doctor*."

"Oh," Hannibal groaned, toying pointlessly with a random napkin on the bar, "Must you?"

His cock had again asserted its impatient hardness when Will called him 'doctor.' He did his best to seem calm and formal, but he was an unmitigated mess, a storm in a teacup.

Will held his beer and tried to look cool, shooting the older man a sly, flirtatiously challenging look, then took a sip and barely hid how he hated the taste. This nonsense only made Hannibal love him more, five times more with every heartbeat. As if his emotions would outpace his heart and that would kill him on the spot. It was *so* much to hold inside, and Hannibal burned furiously to let it out. Will's awkward cuteness, the sweet naivete and yes, yes his entire fixation on Hannibal, all of it too much, too good, more than Hannibal deserved.

And so, Hannibal wasn't surprised so much as enraged that others had noticed Will's almost unbelievable level of beauty and decided to do something about it.

“Well, hello beautiful,” said a total stranger who came to greet Will with a slow, suggestive smile, a man in his twenties (probably a college dropout) (probably the worst person in the world) (probably someone who should stay away from Will if he wanted to keep his *teeth.*)

The man, closer to Will’s age and much more shamelessly admiring than Hannibal, ignored Hannibal completely, put himself cozily on Will's other side and introduced himself as “Glenn,” and Will had the audacity to also begin ignoring Hannibal and engage the neanderthal in introductory remarks.

Hannibal’s hands both formed fists on the bar. He tried to control his breathing and raging heartbeat. He’d never felt so protective, not since Mischa, but this was *different*, it was wanting more than to guard someone precious, it was also wanting Will all to himself and to break *Glenn*’s hand if this went on another moment.

“Would I like to dance?” Will sighed in response to the stranger’s attentions, putting a hand to his chest as if these plastic, shallow compliments rocked his world. It was all for Hannibal, and damn…it was working!

“Well, I don’t know…” Will’s lashes fluttered again and he smiled, “sure I’d like another drink, *thank* you Glenn.”

With his sparkling sapphire eyes, he did more than accost Hannibal with unforgivable rebellion; he tormented, he harangued, he dazzled.

“Wait just a damn minute, Glenn,” said a brunette woman with two low ponytails and a pair of cut-offs she’d sewn a rainbow patch to the butt of. “I saw him first.”

The woman was closer to a girl, really, maybe eighteen or nineteen and Hannibal hated her as well. Will promised them each a dance and took a sip of the drink which Glenn bought him, dark liquor with a cherry in it. He winked at Hannibal and followed Glenn to the dancefloor, where he danced with absolutely terrible coordination along with the others who were bopping back and forth like drunken field mice to some particularly terrible song about rocking someone like a hurricane.

Hannibal’s temples pulsed. He reached for Will’s drink, took a sip and confirmed it was a rum and coke, the last thing Will needed in this environment. So he downed it himself, sitting on a barstool smoldering, staring at Will who got more confident by the second dance where he grooved easily beside the young woman – she had an obnoxious name, Stella or Starlette or Selena or Satan, something like that.

Will didn’t need to do much to seem like a capable enough dancer, just move those hips of his and let the music enter his body, making him relax and enjoy himself. Hannibal needed five cold showers and a pillow to scream into.

The next song was “Damn, I Wish I Was Your Lover,” and Will looked over, while beginning to dance with yet another eager partner, a tall blonde woman in a leather jacket and a short matching skirt.

He looked over and saw Hannibal watching him, and he smiled softly. The lyrics were sexy and Will was learning fast, how to move. Knowing exactly what he was doing.

"*I had a dream, I was your hero*
*Damn, I wish I was your lover*
*I'll rock you till the daylight comes*
*Make sure you are smilin' and warm…*"

Will should *not* be allowed to dance to this song. Hannibal was barely hanging onto his composure.

The blonde put her hands on him, around his beautiful neck, her evil fingers dangling over the back of his shirt and Hannibal couldn't take it anymore. If Will touched her back and drew her close he would lose his mind.

Hannibal stood with a hard blaze in his eyes and crossed the room to stand beside Will and the blonde before he even knew what he was doing. "Excuse me," he said gruffly, barely polite. "May I cut in?"

"Guess so," shrugged the blonde, "I need to go to the little girls' room anyway and redo my lipstick. I'll take back my dance when I return," she winked, clueless of the tense scenario she'd wandered into, half-interested in checking out other attractive prospects on the dancefloor and the snack menu over the bar.

Come back for a dance with Will? *The hell she was.* Hannibal gave her a "polite smile" that was more like the grimace a venomous snake gives right before striking. And the moment she took her vulgar talons off of Will and disappeared somewhere into the ether of this hellhole, Hannibal slid in and took her place, steadily taking hold of Will's waist and grasping his hand.

Will hadn't expected this, apparently. He'd wanted it, but had no way of knowing if his bratty, unwarranted antics would pay off, giving hope to his naive yearnings.

"What, exactly, do you think I've done to deserve this?" Hannibal asked, his voice tight and quietly wrathful. His fingers caressing Will's hand, heavy and clinging on the younger man's waist.

Will hadn't really responded to any of the relatively chaste incidental touches from his previous dance partners, but now, he let out a sigh as if he'd been holding his breath for a lifetime waiting for Hannibal to touch him like that and give just one sign he felt the same way.

"Will? If you're done playing games…" Despite the scolding words, Hannibal automatically moved Will a little closer, his hand stroking slowly across the boy's back.

The song changed to a new one, and why did it have to be…

"Oh, Jesus," Will said under his breath as the singer on the jukebox announced, *"I don't want anybody else / when I think about you I touch myself..."*

“Can’t you see it’s unfair, trying to make me jealous?” Hannibal asked, lost in Will’s silently desperate gaze. Their bodies felt *perfect* together. More right than anything. Will, slender but strong and dazed, not with drink but desire, swaying against Hannibal with tantalizing moves, following his lead, hypnotized.

“Hmm? Oh. I’m really sorry,” Will said, looking sincere but distracted. “I lost it a little, but on the other hand I wasn’t expecting anyone to flirt with me or wanna dance, like…nobody at school acts like that about me.”

“They’re fools,” Hannibal almost hissed, how infuriating.

Will didn’t even *know*, he had no idea.

He’d been raised so dismissively and bullied enough that he had no idea what life would be for him when he graduated and met new people, in the real world, outside the games and cliques of high school.

“Of course you have admirers, of course no one has taken their eyes off of you all night,” Hannibal told him, “You’re stunning.”

Will froze, staring at him, “No, I’m not. You’re the stunning one, I’m a disaster.”

“You…” he shook his head, “I’ll say it once to make you understand, since somebody should probably tell you. And so that you know to let me wither in my misery without provoking me further, drawing me in so that I have to reject you when all I want…”

“What?”

“You’re…transcendently beautiful.” Hannibal watched Will’s face shifting from wonderment to disbelieving excitement, barely held in. “But these are deep waters,” he made himself add, “and you don’t understand what you’re getting yourself into.”

“It’s you,” Will answered on a halting breath, as if he depended on Hannibal to supply the next gust of oxygen to sustain him, “If it’s you, then it’s all I want. I told you. I’m not afraid of whatever–”

“That’s just it,” Hannibal argued, as with a broken sigh he let himself rake his hand through Will’s hair only once, to find the curls even more soft and perfect than he expected. Every inch of him, perfect. Flawless. How could he be the one to ruin the most special, irreplaceable boy he could imagine?

His uncle had told him, and his inability to save his family had told him he was worthless, scum, irredeemable, an embarrassment to the proud Lecter line. He was just a blemish on the earth no matter how he tried to work it off with intelligence and charm. When it came down to it, Robertus was probably right, he suffered because he deserved to, and it was all his own fault. He wasn’t going to involve Will in…in…

“I can’t believe I spent the whole night making a fool of myself over my first real crush,” Will sighed. “Now you’ll never speak to me again, I bet.”

“That’s…” Hannibal didn’t have a single realistic, appropriate thing to say. “I don’t know about that, now will you please come with me, before you acquire a full harem of dance partners?”

Will shrugged, “Okay, I give up, I’ll go. But do you think it was the shorts? You can be honest with me.”

The joke, which hit far too close to home given how amazing the shorts did look on his supple frame, made Hannibal flex his hands out of Will’s view, walking behind the younger man on their way to the exit.

“That was part of it,” he answered belatedly, holding the door for Will, who smiled at the gentlemanly gesture. “But not all.”

“Hmm. Are you saying I’m the whole package?”

Will somehow managed to find “pockets” in the shorts which seemed too short to provide them. He tucked his hands into the pockets and walked backwards giving Hannibal that look again, the one with raised eyebrows and smirking that got the doctor’s blood pumping too hot and fast.

“Please stop asking me what I’m saying,” Hannibal begged wanly, “and watch where you are going–”

His arms shot out protectively when Will narrowly side-stepped the base of a parking meter on the sidewalk.

“I got it, Dr. Lecter,” Will replied archly. “You’re not my boyfriend, remember, you aren’t supposed to look out for me all the time.”

Hannibal rolled his eyes. “As if I could help it.”

“I won’t ask what you’re really saying this time. Or what you’re thinking. Even though I’d like to.” Will ducked his face to hide a shy and flattered smile that made Hannibal’s heart feel it would burst.

They made a slow path down the strip of local shops, bars and restaurants, almost as if they were intentionally prolonging this evening together. As if Hannibal could help it.

“I take it your knee is fully healed, since you were doing an apt impression of John Travolta on the dancefloor back there,” Hannibal resumed after a few minutes of uncomfortably happy silence, attraction simmering so much it was a wonder the very air of the summer night did not catch fire.

“Oh, please, I’m not starting any Saturday Night Fevers and you know it. I’ve never danced outside of a school gymnasium before. You know what it’s like there.” He stopped on the sparsely populated sidewalk, miming a middle school-style posture that did persist pretty much all the way to graduation (dirty dancing being grounds for dismissal from said school gym dances).

Will put his arms around the neck of an imaginary partner who probably had their nonexistent arms around Will's waist, and Hannibal was jealous of a theoretical teenager who might sway awkwardly to and fro with that gorgeous boy to the tempo of some over-played, sickly-sweet pop ballad. Someone who was allowed to love Will, but could not ever begin to love Will as deeply and fully as Hannibal did.

He had nowhere to put these feelings, caught in the constant peril of letting them come out through his eyes and lips and from his body in looks, forbidden touches he knew he could not stop if he gave in.

"You're a real dancer, a great dancer," Will said, cheeks flushed pink as he scratched the back of his neck, then sank teeth into his pillowy lower lip again.

"Thank you, Will." Hannibal smiled, although it seemed it would crack his face, and paused as they were getting closer to the church parking lot where his car waited. "Would you like a ride home?"

"I don't need one. I live right down that way, it's a short walk. See, look at me, I ain't tryin' to get you all alone in your dark, fancy car. Progress?"

Hannibal smirked. "I'll hold off on awarding praise for progress when you're looking like that, Will." Dark eyes sparkling, he added, playful yet intent, "May I walk you home, then?"

"Maybe, but not yet. I got a question for you."

"Oh, no."

"One more?" Will laughed anxiously. "C'mon, what can it hurt?"

Hannibal groaned, running a hand through his slightly sweaty hair, attempting to slick it back from his overheated face. It stayed that way for a moment, then flopped back to his forehead in a glossy fringe. "Come out with it, you dreadful boy."

"You old smoothie," Will retorted, pleased. "My question's, if I promise to be good from now on will you give me one more shot at bein' your friend?"

He pouted and posed his hands as if at prayer, prompting an even longer groan from a disbelieving Hannibal.

"You can't be serious. *Are you saying* you're going to be good? After what I just witnessed at that foul arena of stale beer and bad decisions? How you punished me with such wicked shenanigans? Are you capable of being good where I am concerned?"

Will stepped closer. It was getting really late now and no one happened to be around. Anyone who was still out would be in the restaurants and bars taking advantage of "last call."

The world seemed to contain only the two of them.

"Are you? Capable of being good where *I* am concerned?" Will stood before him, bravely looking into his eyes, demanding the sort of honesty that made Hannibal feel exposed, like

Will could tear layers of his skin, his reserve and pride away that easily.

Will could have anything he wanted from Hannibal, and it was getting to be obvious.

“It depends on the context of the word ‘good’ in that sentence,” Hannibal responded, falling helplessly into a flirtatious tone. His smile was very soft.

“Great answer.” Will grinned. “Perfect. So the deal is, you kiss me once, get it out of my system, and after that the mystery will be dead and I’ll be over you. I will still wanna be friends of course but I won’t be wondering about kissing you. Or anything else. Cause see, maybe you’re a terrible kisser with garlic breath and that will just totally make me see you as the much older, wiser, responsible adult you clearly are and not the tantalizing sex god I might otherwise assume. Plus, I won’t worry too much about the context of the word ‘good’ in that sentence since I’ll be done with all that stuff. Otherwise, I kinda gotta admit that wonderin’ about that night after night just might kill me.”

Will talked fast, smart, and cute. His accent made everything sound sexier and the ridiculous speech made Hannibal feel even wilder to possess him.

“Do you ever stop that naughty mouth of yours?” He closed the distance between them, cupping Will’s face and feeling the hot, smooth skin, then pressing his thumb to pull down Will’s bottom lip.

Will gasped softly, still staring at Hannibal. The older man moved his hand, placing it on Will’s shoulder in a slow massage.

“Do you wanna, uh, help me stop it?” Will blinked at him, breathing too quickly.

“How can we?” Hannibal glanced around. They could hardly seal this deal out in the sidewalk, quiet as it was. People might walk down there at any time, the later it got, the closer to closing time.

Finally, his eyes lit on a phone booth sat by a bench at a nearby bus stop. The bus itself had been out of commission for several years but the small waystation remained as a popular newspaper reading position for the townsfolk, a good place to stop and tie loose shoelaces or sip a cold drink on another boiling hot day. A place to make a quick call home for a ride or a drunken love confession to an ex.

“Come,” he beckoned, taking Will’s hand in his loosely, easy to let go if they suddenly needed to.

He led the boy to the phone booth, which fit them both tightly inside, a typical situation for two callers who both wanted to participate in a conversation, especially teen gossip.

But they hadn’t come in there to talk.

“One kiss,” Hannibal conceded, his tone still mischievous and insistent on holding up the deal, but his eyes so intense he worried it would frighten Will.

If his gaze scared Will, it only made him press closer. “You take the lead,” Will requested in an aching, small voice. They both smelled faintly of the cigarette smoke from the bar, the light aroma of rum. Under that was all warm desire and hints of each of their shower soaps, mildly overlaid with sweat.

The phone booth was uncomfortable, even hotter than outside it, almost suffocating, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except this secret, stolen chance to have one single kiss out of this whole mess, out of all the time they could have together under different circumstances. Hannibal felt the ambitious thrust of wanting to make it incredible for Will. That feeling battled with a half-smothered comment from his conscience, that he should try being a bad kisser like the boy said. If he really cared about Will, he’d do a terrible job kissing him.

But Will’s lips were dry and chapped, his eyes bright, vivid, trusting. He tested the waters by placing his hands on Hannibal, resting on the waistband of his shorts, his fingers barely brushing naked skin beneath Hannibal’s shirt. And their bodies were so close that crushing them together could happen if one of them nudged ever so slightly forward.

“Alright then,” Hannibal nodded, agreeing to the *take the lead* part.

Will did not know what to do. He did not lick his lips, he did not close his eyes. The innocence and inexperience did something to Hannibal that was dead wrong. It made him fucking hot and bothered, dying to be not only the first one to do anything to this gorgeous boy, but to be the only one who ever got to touch him.

“You’re supposed to close your eyes, baby,” he murmured, caressing Will’s face, adoring him with his touch, keeping it gentle but sensuous. As to the endearment, it couldn’t be stopped. It fell from his tongue like letting out a long, held-back breath.

“Hannibal,” Will gasped at the name, “Please, I l…”

“No, shhh,” Hannibal put a finger on his boy’s lips and smiled sadly. “One kiss, and for this one kiss I’ll call you whatever I want. But let’s not say things that…do you understand?”

“Yes.” Will let his eyes flutter shut and Hannibal clasped his face, stroking his jaw.

Leaning down slightly, he pressed a soft, fast kiss to Will’s perfect, cracked, dry lips, which even *tasted* pink, so sweet. Will didn’t know to lick his lips before a makeout session, so Hannibal did it for him eagerly, and that made Will cry out as if quietly shattered. His hands moved to Hannibal’s front, feeling his strong chest and the pounding heartbeat beneath.

“How was that?” Hannibal pressed their foreheads together, “Would you like me to –”

Will responded by flinging his arms around Hannibal’s neck and sealing their mouths together, wantonly licking the seam of the older man’s mouth until the doctor opened to him on a ragged moan.

The battle between his desire and morals fell away like a useless husk failing to cover his emotions once their mouths brushed together.

Once Will was learning to french kiss by sliding his tongue against Hannibal's, there was no morality, none that mattered. Distantly, Hannibal understood this was a mistake, that they would never be able to stop, and they would eventually be caught. That someday, Will might look back and regret this. Hannibal might regret this, if he ended up hurting Will.

Hannibal hoped not, he hoped they never regretted it come what may, because this was the best moment of his whole life. He knew happiness in a way he'd never felt before, knew it in the way they roughly shoved aside reality and made their own world in the phone booth. Because the world only did include the two of them and this was their first time kissing each other.

Will's sweet little moans and sighs drove him crazy. With a growl, he nibbled at the boy's lower lip, then pushed him against the glass wall of the booth. On the outside the whole booth was covered in posters, so no one could see what was happening.

"I'm sorry," he sighed, kissing Will's forehead. "Too rough?"

"No, you can do it again," said Will, his eyes glazed, and Hannibal repeated the manhandling, lifting him slightly from the wall then pushing him against it with a feral stare leveled on the honest and needy face beneath him.

Will was so soft and submissive, letting out more gasps of his name and "please." Hannibal let the boy put his hands under his shirt and feel his body, but the sensation of the long, beautiful and curious fingers exploring his naked skin made him unbearably aroused.

"Do you like having your hair pulled?" He asked, and Will looked confused again.

"I don't know. Do it and let's find out," he suggested, staring at Hannibal's mouth anytime he wasn't kissing it.

Hannibal smiled. They were so playful together; they trusted each other completely, but they felt very serious at the same time. It was giving each other pleasure and seeing what worked, and it was wonderful.

Their mouths collided again and Hannibal let himself show his dominating side, moaning as he ran his hand through Will's hair, then gave a small pull. He took a second to look at Will and understand what the resulting whimper was all about.

"Again," Will panted, "Be rough with me."

He pulled Hannibal tighter against him and sought that roughness with the raw enthusiasm of someone discovering a side of themselves they didn't know existed. Immediately he wanted to be inundated by Hannibal's aggression and kept sighing for it again and again, when Hannibal groped him with firmer hands or bit at his neck, not going too hard but certainly introducing him to the feeling of pain and pleasure mixed together. "More," Will begged, "Please do that again, harder."

As Hannibal began to kiss him harder, tugging at his curls and clutching at his back, Will instinctively rubbed himself against Hannibal's thigh, placed between his own legs as they

clung together and the kiss got wet, sloppy, going on and on.

They had both realized, without having to say, that if they kept on kissing, they could make the one kiss a very long and indulgent one. So they never stopped, pausing occasionally to breathe, then starting again, Hannibal handling Will with a knowing, confident and experienced type of control that the boy responded to with such excitement.

Hannibal might have been okay if it wasn't for Will rubbing on him like that, an animal in heat, a young man who had taught himself self-pleasuring on the sly and felt embarrassed about how often he did it. He rubbed his cock against Hannibal like he might grind against his bed, the arm of a couch, his pillow, whatever he could get away with when no one was watching.

Will whispered, "oh God" when he did that, and Hannibal felt how hard he was. The next thing he knew, he was groping that perfect little body shamelessly, feeling every place he had lusted after, the slim hips and the plush ass with those skimpy shorts tight across it.

He kissed Will with scorching intensity and grabbed his ass, encouraging Will to keep grinding against him, setting a rhythm. "So good," he said, voice throaty between kisses, right before he claimed Will's lips again, "That's it, angel, go ahead. Feel nice?"

"Yes, yeah…Oh, god, Hannibal," Will moaned, looking lost, and Hannibal knew he was in so much delirious pleasure simply from kissing and being felt up, he was ready to burst at the slightest touch. He was painfully sensitive, the same as Hannibal.

In a confused flurry of uncontrollable feelings and needs, Will kissed Hannibal, grinding on him and reaching over to stroke the older man's cock through his shorts. "Fuck," he said, wide-eyed as Hannibal kissed his neck and held his hair harder to get in a bite, firm and sucking.

Hannibal was *big.* Will, rutting on him and groaning in pleasure, throwing his head back even more wanting Hannibal's teeth and tongue and lips on his delicate, pale skin, Will was well-endowed, too. Still, the surprise of the older man's cock being quite that engorged and rock hard made Will grab the fabric of Hannibal's shirt tight at his bicep, pulling and twisting as he rocked his hips up, getting closer.

"For me?" he asked, panting, his moans building, getting louder so Hannibal had to shush him. "All for me?" He put his lovely hand over the bold, hard line of Hannibal's dick and simply moved it up and down in an awkward stroke, no tempo or knowledge of what to do, all instinct.

"For you," He nipped at Will's ear and growled again, breath hot on him, "You get me so hard, baby. I want you so badly."

"Hannibal, I'm…oh, fuck, I can't…" Will's eyes went even wider and Hannibal put his hand hurriedly over the soft, moist lips he'd been laying lusty siege to.

A moment later, Will's hips spasmed hard against Hannibal and he released into his underwear, getting his shorts wet in front. While he was grinding, he'd still been stroking

Hannibal over his clothes, lashing his tongue against the older man's and getting firmer with his inexpert touch on the solid manhood he handled with such worshipful lust.

Will was still moaning and shaking with his lips pressing sighs and wild sobs of pleasure against Hannibal's hand when Hannibal began to move against Will's hand, which could half wrap around him even with the clothes in the way.

"Yes," Hannibal moaned, kissing Will again, ready to devour him.

He rocked his hips several more times, making his cock slip up and down against the boy's hand. Will's growing confidence collided with Hannibal's overpowering need until Hannibal bucked into his fingers more wildly, spilling in his own shorts and muttering harshly, "*fuck,*" trying and failing to suppress a long groan of pleasure deep in his throat, because the orgasm was that deep.

"It feels so much better when it comes from you," he sighed, and Will was ragdoll weak in his arms, smiling and trembling.

"So much," Will gave a breathy laugh against his lips with the next kiss, and if they could, they'd have done it again, right there.

Public setting, mess of cum in their clothes, hands wildly wandering each other's bodies while they gasped and plundered each other's lips with hot, demanding tongues, teasing teeth.

But they couldn't do it again, especially because someone was knocking on the door of the phone booth and god knew how long they'd been doing that.

Will giggled and Hannibal rolled his eyes, covering his boy's naughty lips again. Really, he couldn't be trusted to behave, but it would be hypocritical for Hannibal to pretend he was any better at decency.

"Hannibal," Will murmured with kittenish, drowsy charm, still high on afterglow. He had his lips on Hannibal's neck and his nails pressed into the doctor's back under his shirt.

"Stop," Hannibal moaned softly, head thrown back with pleasure, "You're impossible, have I mentioned?"

To the person outside he called politely, "dreadfully sorry, I've had to call home overseas. I'll be another ten minutes at least."

"Ten minutes?" A man drawled back, disappointed. "Ain't got ten minutes. My wife's fit to be tied when I stay out past two without callin' to check in and prove I ain't cheatin.'"

Will laughed under his breath, lifting Hannibal's shirt and kissing his bare chest, over his ribs, nuzzling chest hair, kissing nipples. If Will put his open mouth there, Hannibal would be unstoppable again. "Don't do that here," he whispered, "I'll…"

Red-faced, he looked away.

“You’ll blow?” Will gave him the sunniest smile. “Good to know.”

Hannibal swore quietly in Italian, then Will whispered to him again and he raised his voice to the man, “The payphone over on Avery’s fixed again, if you want to try that one.”

“Oh, perfect, thanks, bud. Hi to your folks back in Norway or whatever.” He trotted somewhat drunkenly off.

“Let’s go,” Hannibal said, holding Will and turning both of them so it was actually possible to get the door open and exit the booth. “Before any more visitors arrive.”

“Still gonna walk me home?” Will asked, blushing and chewing his lip again, ruffling the same curls Hannibal had so recently been pulling that he could still feel it in an after-echo of joy on his palms and fingers.

“I think I had better,” Hannibal nodded. He didn’t speak again for a while, at odds with himself, the universe pulling him to bliss while his conscience wanted him burnt at the stake.

They stopped at his car, where he opened the trunk and grabbed his traveling bag with its extra clothes, plus some skin cleansing wipes from his small box of toiletries.

“Is that…like a go bag?” Will looked intrigued.

But he had no idea how he looked, with his messy curls spilling wherever they liked and his eyes still red from tears of pleasure, his lips looking ripe as the juiciest cherries from all their kisses. His mouth was still slick from the two of them together, and Hannibal imagined with sudden, sharp, profane vividness, having his cock in Will’s mouth with those lips wrapped around him.

He closed the trunk and gulped, the vision barely dissipating as he answered Will bluntly. “Yes. My uncle could turn on me with greater aggression and more unpleasantness at any time. I like to be prepared for a fast departure.”

“Seems to me,” Will mused as they walked a bit crookedly along, getting uncomfortable now with their sticky underwear, “He treats you shitty enough as it is. And you kinda let him.”

“I can be a masochist at times when it comes to old hopes from my childhood. I know I should let them go, and that we’ll never be a real family, but I came here just the same.”

The unaccustomed honesty was so natural, only with Will. He’d never spoken in this amount of detail of his sadness and bad habits, not even to Chiyoh.

“Yeah. And now you’re here, with me.”

Hannibal squeezed his hand and watched the moonlight playing over his angelic features with a subtle silver gleam. “Yes.”

They wound their way down an old dirt road which Will described as the longer and more secluded way to get to his street. In the woods beside the road they changed their clothes, cleaned up and shrugged on fresh khaki shorts and polo shirts.

Hannibal gave Will a boyish grin of his own when he pulled his shirt over Will's head, loving how the boy put his arms up so obediently and adored Hannibal taking care of him. He'd never had someone to take care of before. It sat sweet in his stomach, making the sourness of life seem unimportant.

The shirt dangled baggy on Will's slighter frame, a body Hannibal had to make himself not touch again, not look too closely. Will looked much, much too deliciously tempting and he'd done enough earlier, enough to apologize for.

This made his face go rueful as he folded the waist of the shorts on Will over, the only way to get them to stay up on his skinnier stomach.

"Ha! Thank you," Will laughed. His own smile faded. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry," Hannibal said gravely, taking his hands, giving them a warm squeeze in his larger ones. "I feel that I took advantage of you, then went much too far. I can't take it back, I can only try and make it right in any way you–"

"You're damn right you can't take it back," Will said with intense stubbornness, eyes blazing. "I took advantage of you right back and you know it. You didn't want to go that far, but I knew what I was doing and what might make it hard for you to stop. I'm a fast learner."

"That's evident," said Hannibal, balling up the dirty clothes and sticking them in his bag, unusually messy about it. He didn't care about the wrinkles and stains in his present state of mind, didn't even notice.

"Yeah, well, I don't want either of us to take it back. The difference of a few measly weeks doesn't change the fact that I'm grown, Hannibal. I'll be eighteen next month and then you're 'allowed' to do whatever you want with me. Far as I know, actually, age of consent says what we did's legal."

"Why do you know that?" Hannibal asked suspiciously, watching Will's cheeks flame.

That boy had actually done research on the laws of the matter. He truly was an impossibly naughty little thing.

"I see. But most people would say it's wrong for me to 'wait' for you to turn eighteen, then be open with affections."

"Why? And you ain't gotta wait for shit, because the only way you can possibly make it up to me for what you just did in that phone booth is to do it about a hundred more times. And whatever else you know how to do, I bet it's a lot, huh?"

Hannibal's face was now redder than Will's. The lazy river coursed pleasantly along behind them, sparkling with the moon and stars reflected in the stream. The trees and those lush wildflowers enclosed them like a promise more than a secret.

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to these wanton little speeches of yours, Will."

He shook his head, but Will just said with a grin, "*Good*", then grabbed his hand and said, "Let's go, I'm tired. *I-wonder-whyyyy*…"

Will was giddy-drowsy, a combination caused by the still ongoing shock of having the man he was obsessed with return the feeling and show him with physical touch the power and truth of adult love. He was adorable and stunning, more than ever, in his oversized clothes that seemed like Hannibal marking him, just as he'd left very faint bite marks on his delicate neck. There was no denying, Hannibal liked the feeling. Will, marked by him and claimed, Will in his clothes, then the fantasy of living together someday, as impossibly perfect as the innocently seductive minx by his side.

"I didn't hurt you?" Hannibal asked, feeling Will's intent gaze on his moonlit profile, the road now turning up a small hill and opening onto a sleepy street of houses.

"If you did, I really fuckin' enjoyed it. Hannibal? I loved every single thing you did to me, and all I want is more of you, and everything you can do to me, while doing my best to pretend you never did it to anyone else. I know it doesn't make any sense, but just don't push me away. Is that too much to ask?"

"Will, I don't want to push you away." Hannibal felt crest-fallen at the mere thought. "I'm not sure I could bring myself to, now."

"You get it? Even though it makes no sense? And the jealousy?" He shook his head, following the dirt road to step off onto a sidewalk. How mad I was when I saw you with that slutty soccer mom outside of church earlier…seems like a million years ago now."

"Who?" Hannibal asked, genuinely baffled. He hadn't been thinking of anyone but Will all night, and certainly made no note of anyone else he'd randomly conversed with.

"And here I thought…" Will threw his hands up. "God, feeling like this is weird."

The neighborhood was in bad shape, but some houses had been well-maintained. They went past all of those modest dwellings while Will kept prattling along. Hannibal could have listened to him forever.

"I do understand, all too well." With an amusedly resentful smile Hannibal added, "You can't imagine what I wanted to do to those admirers of yours at the Tipsy Tap. You might not want to know."

"Same as I'd do to anyone competin' with me for you, I bet." Will whistled. "Wouldn't be pretty."

"There's a reason we both ended up in anger management classes, after all." Hannibal chortled. "We are a combustive pair."

"I like that about us." Will walked along the curb, balancing relatively well until he put a foot wrong glancing at the man beside him.

Hannibal caught him easily and kissed his forehead. “I can’t stand the idea of not being around to protect you, baby. I want there to be…*us*.”

“Then let’s be us.” Will looked so happy at the thought, it took Hannibal’s breath away. “Let’s be! We have the whole summer. And listen, you don’t have to let anyone treat you bad, not your uncle, not no one, okay? Come and get me whenever you want and I’ll take your mind off it. I won’t let anyone hurt you. You’re mine now, remember.”

“Yours,” Hannibal said wistfully, “But I have a life in Baltimore.”

“I don’t care, do you?” Will scoffed. “You happy in Baltimore?”

Hannibal smiled and shook his head.

“I knew it. You happy here with me?”

“Exquisitely,” he admitted.

“That’s all we need to know. I think you should stay here with me instead, forever. Grady won’t mind if he has to get another roommate for that apartment, and you an’ I can find our own place.”

“People will talk. It seems inappropriate to say the least, with the gap in our ages and how obvious it will be that the affair between us began in summer, you barely graduated from high school, and me already well into my career and adult life for many years.”

“Like I’ll ever be proper at any age,” Will smirked, earning himself a shoulder bump and a doting smile from Hannibal.

“It’s only that…the way you describe the future, darling…I don’t think that’s how it usually works. I don’t want to encourage those ideas, knowing them to be castles on hills. It’s…”

“Childish? I don’t care about that, either.” Will laughed. “You oughta try it sometime. It’s liberating.”

They reached the worst-looking place on the street, a drab house with a weak roof and chipped paint. The yard was scattered with litter and the grass overgrown.

Hannibal frowned, not wanting this to be where Will lived, for the last however-many months with that foster father who he also hated the idea of, who didn’t treat his Will with affection but instead unearned hate and even abuse. He didn’t want to send Will back there now that he saw it before his eyes, in actuality.

“Aw, shit, what’s he doing home?” Will complained, seeing the truck in Earl’s driveway and immediately backing up. “C’mon ‘fore he sees us…”

But beady eyes had already noticed Will. A brusque voice called his name, then coughed.

A man was in the driveway in the dark, no light overhead like most homes had. Whatever he was up to, it was equally shady.

“The hell you doin’ out here in the damn dark at this hour, boy?” Earl cackled, wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

A better question for Earl himself, Hannibal surmised. When they walked closer, he glimpsed at the stacks of boxes on the passenger seat of Earl’s truck. Generic, flat rectangular boxes, the sort used to ship medical supplies. The man’s grizzled appearance, shifty demeanor and the way he kept sniffing told Hannibal all he needed to know about *that.*

Earl had probably once been a handsome man, but even in the shadows, Hannibal recognized the look of regular drug abuse and habitual mistreatment of others that made the external face and body look similar to the decaying soul within. It was a cruel face, especially when he looked at Will in the way Robertus looked at Hannibal. The same hate, translated into a different culture. Within seconds, Earl’s presence chilled Hannibal to the bone.

“And you brought a friend,” Earl added, the sarcastic smile of greeting changing to suspicion when he saw Hannibal. “Who’s this, Will?”

Chapter End Notes

**Coming up:** In the past, Hannibal and Will end up solving the Earl problem in an unexpected way. In the present, Will wakes up with his fear of getting his heart broken again going strong. Hannibal is more determined than ever to court him and win his heart back by Christmas, for good this time. A bit of unexpected assistance comes in the form of very small matchmakers...🥰

# An impatient boy waiting on a hopeless dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Will.**
**Now.**

“Aw, hell,” Will mumbled sleepily, emerging like a sand snail from the disheveled covers late the next morning.

His whole body had that heavy, residual, pleasured soreness of long, hard sex and his ex-boyfriend was currently lying there in his bed with a huge, lazy smile like the cat who got the goddamn cream.

“Good morning, Will.”

Hannibal had been kind enough, at least, to put his Walk of Shame Clothes from Last Night on rather than resting naked while waiting for Will to wake up. God knew what Will was capable of doing if Hannibal had still been naked, but Will wasn’t sure *he* wanted to know.

Thinking about that stuff tended to lead to doing that stuff, after all. Clearly.

“I ain’t hungover enough for this,” Will complained, rubbing his eyes.

Thankfully, he was also clothed, albeit only in his boxers, but better than nothing. Hannibal’s golden gaze, smug as a motherfucker, really seemed to suggest otherwise.

Will explained, already tired enough to want to faint, “It’s school vacation now and I gotta fetch my kids from the sitter ‘fore they hot wire a car and beat it to the closest airport, hide in a storage compartment and go spend Christmas as vagrant thieves in Portugal or something.”

“That is a pressing concern,” Hannibal nodded, suddenly looking businesslike. “Would you like me to accompany you?”

“As what?” Will asked incredulously, busy scouring a nearby laundry basket for towels and a washcloth. “My too-old-for-me ex from twenty years ago who I got into bed with last night in some kind of insane fit of incomprehensible, stress-driven desperation?”

“I assumed you would word it more chastely than that for the sake of the children,” Hannibal answered smoothly.

His humor was intact but questions and worries had made their gradual way into those pretty eyes.

“I take it you would prefer my departure,” Hannibal guessed.

He'd sat up and stretched his sexy arms across his knees, hair all sleep and sex-mussed. Will's heart lurched like it was trying to catapult him back into bed to slobber a million dumb, helpless kisses all over the man.

*No, cut it out. Jesus, again with that?*

"Yes, Sherlock, thank you. Feel free to grab a shower before you go."

Hannibal nodded. "How hospitable of you, Will."

"Sorry, was that not good enough? Thank you for the sex, I guess. Thank you for fixing my A.C. even though I plan to pay you back. You can have a shower and one coffee, is that better?"

*Don't think, don't feel, don't think, don't feel* – the disorienting, nauseating terror of falling in love with Hannibal again was making Will act out in the worst ways. He couldn't protect both of them. He felt torn apart and wretched and he had to be alone, had to – he didn't even know. He was just scared.

Hannibal frowned, broke off eye contact and took up his phone from the table, flicking the screen on like he suddenly had better things to do.

"Oh, how can I bear this generosity," he marveled sarcastically.

Sarcasm sounded extra fancy and effective in a Lithuanian accent, to Will's annoyance.

"I–" Will scowled, determined to forge through the anxiety and be sensible. Still, he didn't want to hurt Hannibal's feelings, but this had obviously been a mistake and he had bigger problems to tackle, impossible as that might seem.

"Perhaps you'll truly outdo yourself and offer me an English muffin." Hannibal began scrolling through whatever email or social media, feigning sincere fascination.

"You're such a–" Will pointed, despite knowing it was rude and that Hannibal hated discourtesy. He almost dropped the large wad of towels in his other hand.

"An untoasted english muffin, of course. You wouldn't want to be needlessly extravagant."

"Know what, wiseass, you take the first shower," Will suggested. "I'll see if I can scrounge up any of my clothes that might actually fit you, Dr. Muscles."

Hannibal seemed mildly flattered but determined not to react to the backhanded compliment. "Don't do me any favors."

"Fine," Will sighed, "Have it your way."

"Quite."

"You always do!" Will called back bitterly before slamming the bathroom door behind him.

“Not always,” Hannibal answered, “*Clearly.*”

Will groaned and took the world’s fastest wakeup call hot shower, then hurriedly scrambled into the clean t-shirt and jeans he’d thoughtlessly carried in – turned out to be a Christmas themed fishing shirt. It was bright red and said “*Merry Christmas and a Happy New Reel*.” A cheap last-minute gift from a brief relationship last year. Will kind of liked it at the time, but now – well, he didn’t have time to care what Hannibal thought of his attire when he didn’t have the emotional wherewithal to fall back into love with Hannibal. So good job that he’d put on a tacky t-shirt.

He stalked into the bedroom to find Hannibal sipping a cup of coffee and wearing a superior, elusive expression of disdain. “William.”

“Take a fucking shower, your majesty, will you?” Will went downstairs just barely not stomping and heard the shower turn on again, then the curtain drawn back.

Flashbacks of Hannibal’s body, his lips, his teeth and tongue, how he made Will feel – too much, way too much to handle, he couldn’t believe he *did* that. He had to get that man out of the house and his life ASAP before he signed up for a broken-hearted Christmas.

Okay. Fine, a *worse-than-usual* broken-hearted Christmas.

The coffee pot sputtered him out a mug full and he blew on it aggressively, desperate to get the caffeine in and get out of Dodge. Concerns about the twins and terror over The Hannibal Thing were battling for control of his anxiety and they showed no signs of negating each other anytime soon. At least one thing he could maybe fix. (it wasn’t Hannibal. It wasn’t ever going to be Hannibal.)

Hannibal, who arrived back downstairs with a princely nod of indifference, wearing Will’s baggiest apparel, a navy blue sweatshirt and matching shorts with the logo of his college on it in bold white font.

Will grimaced. “Shit, can you turn that inside out, actually? It’s gonna be obvious-”

Hannibal rolled his eyes and yanked the shirt off, nearly giving Will a heart attack at the sight of his perfect upper body, all that soft chest hair, the little round tummy, the dark, sensitive nipples and the huge arms he wanted to–

“Heaven forbid,” Hannibal snipped once the shirt was turned into a plain blue, just like Will.

“What, you regret it?” Will asked, wanting to kick himself the next second, what the hell did it matter?

“I thought I made myself perfectly clear,” Hannibal answered lucidly. His eyes were intensely smoldering. He stepped into Will’s space, sized him up and said “I mean to win you back and it won’t be quite that easy to dissuade me, it's possible. I can certainly understand that you’re afraid–”

“Oh, yeah, can you?” Will felt like he was going to freak, knew he had to get out of there before he did. He rushed for the door, got out to the porch before Hannibal was behind him grabbing gently for his arm.

“Will, we can make time to really talk about this. All of it. Everything I’ve said to you since returning has been sincere.”

“Please. You came down here to visit your sick uncle and now, ‘winning me back’ is just the distraction you need, cause we all know you don’t plan to spend more than the bare minimum bedside vigil’in.”

“You were never a distraction. Well. Not in that way.” Hannibal gave him the cutest tentative smile, his hair wet and a little spiky, begging for Will’s fingers to run through it.

Will wanted to climb him like a tree. “Sure. Like I’m gonna buy that.”

“Why are you being like this with me, after last night?” Hannibal looked crestfallen.

“Because I’m an idiot and you’re not gonna help me not be an idiot, alright? So get, already. Can’t you see it hurts me to think about? That Summer. You leavin’. The years after.” *Every one of them.*

“I’m not here to hurt you. I lo–”

“Go,” Will insisted. “*Please* give up on me already. It used to be so easy for you.”

“That’s an unnecessarily hurtful lie,” Hannibal sneered, genuinely offended.

He did a Hannibal Lecter version of storming past Will across the lawn, which was essentially an elegant stride (a little faster than usual, with a rigidly displeased expression), accidentally triggering the sprinkler system.

The older man hopped out of the sudden stream of cold water, swearing in his native tongue while Will laughed bitterly, “Good enough for ya.”

“If you say so.” Cutely dribbled in water all over his long, pretty strong legs above his own nice shiny loafers that made the borrowed outfit look really stupider than necessary, Hannibal shook his hand out, getting rid of some excess droplets.

“I do. Bye, now.” Will waved sarcastically.

“Indeed.” Hannibal turned on his heel with a squeak of his doctor shoes on the wet grass, his dignity severely undercut despite his unbreakable aristocratic bearing.

“Yeah, whatever, Merry Christmas!” Will called angrily. Not meaning it *at all.*

“And a Happy New Year to you,” Hannibal replied, about as visibly irritable as he ever got, cheeks flushed with indignation.

"*What did that even mean?*" Will dropped his head, wet curls flopping water into his eyes as he, too swore, albeit in good old Louisianian.

"Son of a –"

"Uncle Will?" asked P.J., Grady's precocious daughter, arriving on the scene with a look like she just got a gander at her first *National Enquirer.*

"Mornin' P.J.," Will sighed, "What are you up to anyway, honey, it's – oh." He'd checked the wristwatch on his hand to discover – "11:15. Readin' anything good lately?"

"Yes. *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm.* I highly recommend it. But Uncle Will, what was all that about between you and Uncle Hannibal?"

P.J. had on overalls and a bright red and green Christmas shirt, and her hair looked like she managed to evade her mother's brush and would catch a scolding for it later. Her glasses looked ready to jump off her nose, she was so intently hanging on Will's reply.

"Uncle Hannibal? Well, ain't that rich. Y'all known him five minutes, and I'm all y'all's actual godfather who's been in your life from the get-go, yet here you are–"

"I like Uncle Hannibal, we all do," P.J. elaborated primly. "He makes the best pancakes ever and he has a cool accent. If we ever get hurt, like for example if we fall out of a tree while bravely rescuing a cat, or get a papercut while reading, he can do *actual surgery* to save our lives. Plus, he helps Mama with the housework so she won't go batshit crazy before Christmas–"

"Don't say batshit."

"Sorry. So…are you and Uncle Hannibal in love?"

"Aw, c'mon, why don't you go see if Magnolia and Wyatt want a ride in the pickup later to get a tree for our house. Y'all can get iced hot chocolate. I'm hopin' Savannah Jean and Rhett might come, too, so cross your fingers for me." He was babbling.

"Oh, I'll go ask Mama! Thank you, Uncle Will." She turned to run home, pausing in her tracks on the sidewalk. "But are you two in love?"

Will got into his truck with a groan and closed the door wearily. "Guess we used to be. See you later, P.J. Be careful now."

P.J. watched Will drive off with a determined, sure smile. She knew from Mama's addiction to the Hallmark Channel that Christmas was a Very Special Time of Love Miracles, and it seemed like two people they cared about needed some help to find that happiness. She hurried home to tell her siblings they had an important new scheme to work on.

***

**Hannibal.**

Hannibal found a large container in the freezer, discerned it to be ice cream and immediately stuck a large spoon in it as he would punch himself in the face if he could.

There was a bit of freezer burn and strawberry cheesecake “swirl” was far from his favorite flavor; it wasn’t even name brand. Groaning, he put a huge spoonful in his mouth, *beggers can’t be choosers.*

And wasn’t he exactly that, a beggar? Knocking on the gates in front of Will’s broken heart begging to put it back together, rejected as he waited with the only needle and thread that could do the job. He was now making a fool of himself.

He found a fuzzy red blanket with bells on the tassels atop the couch in the living room and wrapped it around his whole body, then collapsed on the couch, barely a moment in this process passing without the continued eating of the terrible old, off-brand ice cream.

The television was on, most likely forgotten; Pauline wasn’t around, but she tended to run the romantic Christmas movies in the background the way some people played classic carols.

“*This Christmas, two opposites are going to learn the meaning of–*"

The overjoyed narrator of the commercial for the next movie (following the same inane template of every other one that had been made, and since arriving at this home he had learned there were hundreds) was going on about all of that damned nonsense and it made Hannibal’s head throb. Or that was the echo of Will’s rejection. Or it was brain freeze.

“What a lot of absolutely misleading propaganda attempting to rouse the beaten spirits to believe there is one single jot of happiness in the world ever to be won, all the while wrapping it in ‘the Christmas spirit’ with a big, red bow and cramming it down the throats of innocent viewers merely wishing to pass the holidays in complete depression and be done with it.”

He was talking to himself and beyond caring.

Staring ahead at nothing, replaying the conversation with Will, he was vaguely aware that the next movie had started following a hot cocoa commercial and a reminder that one could download a free app with a checklist of the films to keep track of.

He wondered if he could trick Robertus into buying Hallmark stock and sinking the whole company, imagining a trash heap full of porcelain ornaments and dvd’s of smiling couples before it was all crushed in a compactor and neatly dropped into the bottom of a deep ravine, better that than pollute the ocean.

Now, this was a somewhat insane movie about a man and woman who were complete opposites and clashed at every turn. She, a brittle lawyer, he, a blue collar gem – Hannibal threw a child’s sock he found on the couch beside him right at the tv. He was tired of these stereotypes! And rooting for the lawyer!

How did this happen? Engrossed, he continued watching, following the ice cream with a half-bag of Fritos also discovered nearby, satiating his resulting thirst with a glass of chardonnay

from a bottle hurriedly grabbed during a mad rush to the kitchen. The commercial breaks weren't long, so he poured the wine in the first available vessel, as it happened a pink sippy cup with orange handles. He left off the top with the spout and decided it was an acceptable compromise.

Now, it seemed that the two opposites had discovered, somehow (he suspended his disbelief) a box of letters inside a hidden drawer of the lawyer's recently deceased great-aunt and the letters, the *letters* – told of a great lost love affair which the aunt had cherished even many years later, saving every message between herself and this other man she had not married, who was not the lawyer's great-uncle.

And in this discovery, reading the letters together, the blue collar gem began to see that his former high school sweetheart had not, in fact, become the devil incarnate by moving to "the big city" and becoming – a lawyer – who wore – power suits – but actually she was a human being who still had emotions.

"I could have told you that, Drew," Hannibal said, scowling at the tv, on his second sippy cup of wine, it being around 1pm but obviously 5 o'clock somewhere.

"Hannibal?" Pauline came somewhat delicately into the room, looking unusually dressed up in a charming ruby dress, a fancy jeweled clip holding one side of her red hair back. "What in the name of Candace Cameron Bure are you *doin'*?"

"It's a long story." Hannibal had begun to weep at this point, because the lawyer discovered that the blue collar gem wasn't prejudiced against all beautiful and mean women who wore fabulous business suits, but rather, worried about falling in love with one and getting his heart broken. This was so familiar. Humph. He cried anyway.

".....Hannibal? Don't worry about it, I mean…" Pauline sat down beside him with a flounce of red chiffon. "Not to come at you with spoilers, but Lacey is gonna end up with Tyler."

"What?" Hannibal blinked at her. "Their *names* are Michelle and Drew."

"Ohhh, right, I was callin' them by the actor's names. They just use the same actors over and over. Soothing. Anyway, don't worry, and generally - you okay?"

"Of course I am," Hannibal insisted. He gestured with the sippy cup, crumpling the empty Fritos bag. "I just think you're mistaken. Can't you see that Michelle has just accepted a proposal from her steady, predictable, big city boyfriend Ted? And that Drew has not even bothered to tell her his feelings, even as he rereads the letters from the past and pines for her?"

He wrung his hands. Gently, Pauline extricated the bag and set it aside.

"They always end up together." She spoke calmly, not acting as if his reactions were crazy or prying about the reasons.

She sat with him and they watched the rest of the movie.

Michelle broke it off with Ted at the last possible opportunity and ran through the airport to tearfully confess her love to Drew, who had been running towards her (in slow motion while a romantic ballad with sleigh bells played) with the same plan.

As they celebrated the holidays by putting a down payment on the building her aunt had wanted to save from the corrupt business people for whom Michelle used to work when she was from the Big City, so that they could open their very own quirky tea shop, Hannibal curled up on his side with a loud jingle of bells from his blanket, tugged tighter around him.

“I hate them,” he complained, sniffling. “Making me worry for forty minutes, it’s unforgivable. I can barely enjoy the ending.”

“Right. So, we’re having a party tonight.” Pauline quickly shut off the tv before the sequel could start and drag him back in. “We have a bit of a predicament and were hoping you might help.”

“Predicament?” Hannibal sniffed again and pulled the blanket over his face. “I suggest you find another savior. As you can see, I’m having a holiday breakdown.”

“Right, but you ain’t given up. I know you can’t and you won’t, that’s what makes you, you. You love Will, and you’re gonna hold out this time because I’ve been watching and I think it’s what you both need. And you should be Santa for our church Christmas party. Very popular event…you’d be a big deal around here.”

“I should go home, check in with my family.” Hannibal pulled the blanket off himself with a flinch. “I apologize for consuming your store of ice cream and overly salty crisps. Chips. Essentially frisbees of salt.”

“Fair enough. And no problem, you’re our guest and been cookin’ up a storm for us. Eat the Fritos, it ain’t like Grady won’t come home with two more bags later. Hannibal, are you gonna help? Ned Allston usually does Santa but he’s got the flu. You got the stature, the height, the swagger.”

“The Santa Swagger?” Hannibal questioned, slightly intrigued at the chance.

“That’s right, not just anyone can do it, or I’d ask Grady. We need that certain Je ne sais quais, you know…”

“Quois,” Hannibal corrected her, fighting back another sob, still absorbing the fact that Drew and Michelle really, truly ended up together. “Is there a sequel to *Dear Christmas*?”

“Hannibal Lecter.” She stood in a huff. “I been patient. You know I’d sit here and watch all three of those movies if I thought you weren’t throwin’ your life away, and it’s offensive for you to tempt me with bad Lacey Chabert movies, offensive. As it is, I’ll have you know that it’s Christmas and Lacey herself and Cameron, *and* that other actress who did all the horror movies in the late ‘90’s, her name escapes me, she’s in *Hey Santa Can You Hear Me,* - have you seen it? Forget it, side tangent. They would all say you’re being an idiot.”

“Because it’s the season of miracles. If that’s true, I should run to the Chateau and pray my uncle recovers post haste.”

“You hate him, so that’s useless and a tangent. Your uncle’s an abusive prick. We’ve had these conversations! If your muffins didn’t take so damn long to mix, I don’t know if we would have had the time, but you did tell me all this shit about how your uncle has been abusin’ you for years, many years, and yet you supposedly came back to Angel Wood to soothe his passin’? Honey, it sounds like the very soil of our community would be offended for his bones to be interred thereto. Don’t kid a kidder.”

“What do you mean? I subconsciously came here for Will?”

“You know you did. So pull yourself out of this right now, get your best ho-ho-ho ready. Will never misses this party; he always donates a free auto repair or detail for the raffle. If you give up, he’ll think that his misconceived notion of why y’all fell out was the truth.”

“I know. He wants me to give up. But that is what Drew wanted Michelle to do.”

“Exactly.”

“But Michelle did not go to Todd.”

“Yes! Even though Todd’s mother was played by Andie MacDowell! Now, who wouldn’t want her for a mother in law? You know Drew loved Michelle. He never got over her. Just needed a nudge.”

“I’m tired of nudging, Pauline. It begins to feel like harassment, and not to mention the danger of breaking my own heart, constantly hoping to have back what I lost for reasons I don’t even understand.”

“Don’t nudge. Show up, be Santa. Let him come to you. See you tryin’. However long it takes. If it’s next Christmas and you’re still tryin’, fine. What the fuck else’ve you got to do?”

“I almost resent what a good point you’ve made there. Very well, where is this costume I’m apparently going to don?”

“Oh! Thank you, Hannibal! You’re a savior. It’s at Vera Lynn Bracker’s house, just down on Grapeseed Tree Lane, by the Baptists’...”

Hannibal refrained from commenting on not only the ridiculous street names of this town, but also the tendency to understand the overall geographical distinctions only by way of the various Protestant sects.

“Pauline, I must thank you. At this moment, I am still in a desperate malaise from which I may never recover. Even so, you have been kind to me in a time so dark that I should have been loath to encounter most anyone else during it.”

“You old softie,” she chuckled, “I knew it.”

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“Okay,” P.J. urged Magnolia and Wyatt, all three siblings crouched in the garden waiting for Uncle Hannibal to walk by.

Uncle Hannibal did, and he looked weird, like he swallowed a whole lemon and someone punched him in the stomach.

“Damn, I really thought you were lyin’, Peej, but he’s got it bad for Uncle Will alright,” Wyatt admitted as Magnolia whispered about the swear jar.

“Mags, do you not think we have more important shit to focus on right now? Like our uncles missin’ out on their epic Christmas love so’s you can have the moral high ground?”

“Huh? Where is the moral high ground? Is it that ant hill? Cuz I told y’all I ain’t goin’ over there, and I don’t care about the three sticks of chalk we dropped next to it, I’m not – “

“The moral high ground ain’t the damn ant hill, Mags. Jeez!”

“I don’t know, it’s kinda similar in some ways. Listen,” PJ chided, “We’re gettin’ off topic. Point bein, our uncles are real dumb and they’d much rather ruin their whole lives than kiss like Gilbert kissed Anne at that dance when–”

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud, not that stupid Anne and Gilbert again.” Wyatt threw up his hands.

“I’mma knock you in the head with *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* if you insult my OTP once more, Wyatt, and I ain’t kiddin’.”

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Pauline informed Hannibal that the evening’s anticipated Christmas soiree would require a large, “real” tree and asked if he would be a dear, in addition to playing Santa, and go and purchase one from the nearby farm.

She tried to give him a blank check from the church to cover the expense, but he told her to keep it and promised to bring an appropriate tree to the gathering before it commenced.

While knowing his hostess only gave him the additional errand to keep him away from self-destruction via Hallmark, Hannibal appreciated the busy work. He phoned the Chateau as he imagined this might be an appropriate outing to spend some quality time with his adopted sister, Chiyoh.

“I love that farm,” Chiyoh said with soft enthusiasm, but then paused. “But is it alright if Charlie is with me?”

“Of course,” Hannibal said, “So long as you understand she dislikes me and I have little patience for her comments.”

“I’m sure you can both behave, for the sake of the holidays.”

“You are?”

Chiyoh laughed shortly. “I’m certain you both had better find a way to coexist, if you do not wish to irk me.”

She clicked off then, leaving Hannibal wondering if he ought to regret the invitation, but unable to conceive a better opportunity to connect with her, given the complications of his family life and the ongoing drama with Will which kept distracting him from all else.

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“This one is beautiful,” Chiyoh gasped, pressing her hands to the trunk of a grand pine tree that quite screamed *Christmas* at a mere glance.

Standing in the large, rustic tree farm’s field, Hannibal observed pleasantly, “You always had an eye for quality, Chiyoh, a stunning specimen.”

“You’ll never fit that in the church hall,” Charlie snorted, one hand on her hip and an eyebrow raised as usual in ongoing, mocking, distrustful critique of Hannibal. “You’d decapitate it.”

“Of course, you would make such an observation,” Hannibal maintained, “Since I approved of it.”

“Am I that predictable, Hanni?” She sing-songed.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, *Charlene.*”

“Whatever. Ain’t my fault you can’t tell the difference between a Charlie Brown Christmas twig and this monstrosity.” Charlie pointed at the tree with sarcastic flourish.

Intending to give them space to chat, perhaps work out their issues and start actually getting to know one another, Chiyoh had casually wandered on, browsing the trees and poinsettias. As always, she was kind, cheerful, and lovely, dressed in jean leggings and a red silk sleeveless top, matching sandals adorning her feet as she walked over the sparkling dust of fake snow which had been wistfully applied to the burning hot, uncomfortable forest in which Hannibal was currently trapped.

Charlie, in a pretty tan jumpsuit that showed off her smooth skin and fit figure, quite tall in heeled sandals, looked very well herself, until she opened her mouth, of course.

It particularly irked him to have so little success in charming either of Will’s friends. Even good-natured, comparatively mellow Grady gave him a wide berth and bare minimum politeness in the house. Hannibal knew he must have truly hurt Will terribly, or they would not have this response even twenty years after That Summer. His total confusion about what, what in particular he had done to cause all of this damage, damage seemingly worse than his own completely broken heart, intensified his frustration. He felt guilty, but did not know his crime so could not make up for it.

Oh, his stubborn, stubborn, impossible boy, his precious Will…Hannibal felt himself infused with new energy of courting Will for Christmas despite the rather disastrous “morning after”

from earlier and the unfortunate abundance of chalky pink ice cream which he consumed as a result.

There was no fresh air to be had in this wretched locale, only another smoldering day in late December, with more festive music cheerfully playing on speakers all around, and many townspeople also looking for their special tree while sipping iced apple cider and "frozen hot chocolate."

Hannibal wished he had brought his sippy cup of wine. "Getting to know each other better," for him and Charlie, was simply encouraging more kneejerk antagonism.

"Chiyoh thought this was a lovely tree," Hannibal observed. He had changed out of Will's college sweats, only smelling them and hugging them a few times, and into one of his more typically dapper ensembles.

His current shirt, for example, an ice blue polo which was nearly sheer and clung attractively to his well-defined pectorals, hugging his biceps with equal affection; his white shorts, perhaps a touch on the overly short side to show off his nice calves and thighs – waste not to, really, given today's humid weather.

A silver lining might be Will taking one look at him and immediately taking back every hurtful word from that morning, apologizing profusely, promising endless love and, for good measure, proposing marriage. He had been rather hazily imagining all of this, for goodness knows how long, before a loud throat clearing shattered the fantasy.

"Earth to Dr. Snobbibal Scoundrel," Charlie said, snapping her fingers. "Did you invite us here to watch you stand in a field staring into space with that creepy half-smile?"

"I didn't invite you," Hannibal glowered.

"Are you two arguing?" Chiyoh sighed, coming back over and crossing her arms. "This is no way to behave. Your affection for me should supersede these foolish old grudges of yours, not to mention the holidays being a time of –"

"If one more person tells me that this is a season of forgiveness and redemption, I will scream to the high heavens," Hannibal snapped. "I care greatly for you, dear sister, but don't ask me to befriend someone who ceaselessly insults me on every meeting."

"Don't ask *me* to befriend the one who ruined my best friend's life and ignored him when he was most needed," Charlie replied coldly.

"That isn't true." Hannibal scowled.

"I'm not speaking to either one of you until you both find a way to be civil." Chiyoh gave them one of her definitive looks, such as made even the strongest conversational opponent shake in their boots.

She stalked off as elegantly as she had arrived, shaking her head and heading for the drink and food trucks.

“That was completely your fault,” Hannibal announced to Charlie.

At the exact same time, Charlie said in a vicious undertone, “Thanks a lot, Lecter.”

They stood side by side, watching his sister and her girlfriend walking around talking pleasantly to the townspeople and enjoying a nice cold drink with an award-winning “cronut,” a splice of two oppositional pastries about as appetizing to him as friendship with Charlie.

“This is some bullshit.” Charlie frowned, then chewed her lip.

Their arms were crossed, one hip popped in a show of *“I’m mad and so cute, baby come take me back*,” and yet not looking at each other, they had no idea they had both adopted the same pose, albeit for different people and reasons.

“I have a proposal,” Hannibal said, turning to face his nemesis, noticing the mirroring posture and immediately changing his own, running a hand over his already flawless hair. “We tell Chiyoh that we have buried the hatchet and become friends. This would only require us to pretend not to despise each other when in her presence. But it seems a better option to me than the other two.”

“The other two bein’ Chiyoh stays mad at us both, hurt feelings thinkin’ we don’t care that she doesn’t like us fighting and wants us to be family or whatever. And, of course, last option, actually talking it out and becoming friends…”

They looked at each other and burst into laughter. “Fuck that,” Charlie snickered. “I can fake not wanting to stomp your foot on sight, if it makes my girl happy.”

“Indeed.” Hannibal nodded, “I can certainly feign having no instinct to smash a cake on your face or push you unexpectedly in a pool or both.”

“I bet. You’re a great liar.”

“You are one to talk.”

Chiyoh returned, smiling expectantly, and they started fake-laughing again, before giving her a “sincere” speech all about their reconciliation and burgeoning “bff” status.

“That is the most nonsensical collection of falsehoods I have heard from either of you yet.” Chiyoh rolled her eyes. “It is, at least, a first step. I am positive that if you tried harder to get along, you’d discover that neither one of you is the villain you assume them to be.”

“Lying?” Hannibal laid a hand on his heart, lashes fluttering angelically.

“Us?” Charlie practically made a halo appear above her head.

“Charlie, I saw a cranberry garland in the shop that would suit our tree at the Chateau, and some homemade jewelry which might be a nice choice for Murasaki’s gift. Will you come with me, help me choose?”

Chiyoh hugged Hannibal, who felt both sheepish at offending her, and unmoved by the forced mended fence.

“I’m trying, you know,” he said when they pulled back.

“I can see that, brother – truly, I can. But I am afraid…” She patted his cheek. “You’re going to have to try harder. You are not there yet.”

Charlie barely stifled a laugh.

“That goes for you, too, Charlie. Come with me, unless you’d like to spend the night on the couch with a certain growling, toothy someone.”

No one liked Uncle Robertus’ dog, Polonius. In addition to being named after the worst character in *Hamlet*, the rotund chihuahua was notoriously bad-tempered.

“Jesus, okay. I’m sorry, honey, please. Don’t do that.” She pouted, and Chiyoh groaned, linking arms with her as they walked away.

“See you soon, Hannibal,” Chiyoh waved.

He nodded sullenly, almost forgetting why he was even there. It was not a successful day thus far, despite good intentions on his part.

His latest sad and self-pitying inner monologue was shattered by the thunderous approach of multiple small humans, some of whom had familiar voices (unlikely as having children for friends would have seemed to Baltimore Hannibal a mere week ago).

Wyatt, PJ and Magnolia were excitedly surveying the trees, chatting with merriment to an older boy and girl who looked almost exactly alike, and also both wore the most absolutely *Fourteen* expression on their faces he’d ever witnessed.

It was immediately obvious that the strawberry blonde haired, freckled, lanky teens were doing their best to pretend the Christmas Tree Farm was “uncool,” though the girl seemed slightly softer on the topic. The younger ones were yipping and encouraging the teens to lighten up, PJ declaring, “Everyone’s a kid at Christmas, Savannah Jean!”

*Savannah Jean.* So, the girl must be Will’s adopted daughter, and that meant her twin was Rhett, Will’s reluctant son. Hannibal felt pressure to try and make a good start with the children of his ex, hoping that this might come in handy if he and Will did get together.

He was scrambling over his own thoughts trying to force a smile and cordial greeting such as would not immediately annoy someone fourteen, when PJ skipped up to him, a large candy cane hooked in her book to mark her page.

Adjusting her glasses, she said excitedly, “Uncle Hannibal - bless my soul! Fancy seein’ you here, of *all places*.”

He squinted slightly at her dramatic emphasis, which he noticed caused Wyatt to appear at her side and mutter “you’re over-doin’ the ‘surprise,’ dummy.”

“Don’t call names now, Wyatt,” Hannibal chided. “Children, always a delight to see you. Apparently not so coincidental. What do you know about my involvement in the church Christmas party and why should you care?”

“Oh, we don’t know…” Magnolia shrugged.

Hannibal might have gotten some answers from this youngest participant in the espionage, but he was interrupted by the sound of a whistle, and an all-too-familiar voice calling, “Y’all stop runnin’ and wait up.”

Will rounded the corner where Hannibal was standing, promptly smacking right into him with an irritated groan.

He rubbed his head, looked Hannibal up and down several times then sneered, “the fuck you wearin’?”

Hannibal sighed as his darling walked off. He recalculated quickly. This was not a lost cause. This was *not* a lost cause, not a *lost* cause, he was not a lost *cause*…

The usual meditation was growing less convincing with each repetition. Still, he soldiered on.

Walking deftly after Will, he fell into step and quipped, “There was certainly no need to stare at me with obvious interest if you find my attire so repulsive. And, incidentally, no problem - regarding the fact that you bumped into me without apologizing, and indeed, insulting me.”

“Fine,” Will grumbled, “You’re right about the second one, *not the first* – I’m sorry. I’m bein’ an ass. You ain’t done nothin’ this time to earn me treating you like you’re the Hannibal Lecter from Back Then.”

“Thank you, Will.” Hannibal beamed.

“You’re still the same person overall, though, and the very sight of you does still terrify and infuriate me,” Will went on, scanning the place for the children, eyes restlessly moving from the bustling field of customers to Hannibal, then back again.

Hannibal smirked. “Thank you, Will,” he repeated.

He saw a medium sized tree that looked about right for the party, full and healthy, fragrant with a woodsy, comforting smell. Pausing by it, he indicated to Will, “Your two disgruntled teenagers and the neighbor children went that way, towards the wreaths.” He was trying to make a good impression of his own selflessness by not attempting to detain Will.

“Thanks,” Will muttered, distractedly heading off in the kids’ direction like he’d never seen Hannibal at all.

He was obviously there with all five children and had been tricked into allowing them to run on ahead, so that he was alone and walking the farm at this moment, in this direction. Able to meet Hannibal one on one. Almost like a date…

That was when Hannibal realized what PJ and her siblings had been up to. He stopped, examining the price tag on the tree, his heart warming. He had three excellent young allies in his knight-like quest to win Will’s love, and owed them a debt of gratitude for their efforts.

Chapter End Notes

**Next time**: Santa!Hannibal...and the big question on everyone's mind...is Will going to sit on his lap? 🎅🔥😈

# Red Light Special

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Will.**

**Now.**

“Anyway, I’m…real glad y’all are comin’ to the party tonight,” Will said, an awkward ice-breaker as Rhett rolled his eyes and continued giving him the silent treatment.

By adopting teenagers, Will had leap-frogged past the age where one could tell a child to behave or Santa would bring coal on Christmas Day.

He was driving them towards the church in his truck, thinking, this was the same damn church where he’d met Hannibal. Why had this one been chosen out of the ten protestant chapters whose names had all been put in the hat for a chance to host the party for the next five years?

As a committee member, Will suspected it might have something to do with the fact that he had tampered with the votes. He wanted an excuse to go back there, even though it was masochistic. And he wouldn’t go, without sort of having to, being obligated to walk in and see the back stairs they had stood at the top of the first time he told Hannibal he loved him, the same old metal chairs from the Anger Management meetings (illustrious teaching duties of which had since been passed down to the next son of the very same family of Preston)

Like a fool, he felt the need to poke the knife of those memories deep into his already wounded heart, ruining the comforting numbness of the same old things he did every year, staining it with Hannibal. Did it feel more honest? Did it give him a terrible, pained thrill to be so close, touch those walls casually, pretend to be fine?

Will never looked at it that close. He just kept fuckin’ doing it.

But hey, it was a damn good party. They had won the gingerbread cookie contest against three neighboring towns last year, bragging rights which nobody was willing to forfeit. The desserts were going to be amazing, for those people who felt like eating, that is. At least they were pretty, when none of Will’s feelings were and a lot of his thoughts were too pretty, containing Hannibal’s face and involuntary memories of their love at its most smoldering and blissful.

“I’m lookin’ forward to the party,” Savannah Jean chirped more enthusiastically.

With the mall money Will had given them last week, they had each been asked to buy an appropriate, festive Christmas-themed outfit for the party.

("Mall" in Angel Wood referred to a strip mall containing a thrift store, a jeweler, a restaurant called Meat 'n Eat which thanks to its name had been the victim of a large inside joke among all residents for ten years, a nail salon and a florist)

Savannah Jean had picked out a sort of boho chic look, with a red dress that was a little shorter than Will would have liked, and a white faux fur vest that had been hanging in the shop for a while given that it was always so damn hot there. A long necklace with a pendant and a pair of faded boots completed the outfit so nicely that Will had decided not to comment on the hemline or the heavy red lipstick she'd put on. With her hair down, brushed and fluffed, and a wistful smile, it looked like S.J. was ready to have a good old fashioned Angel Wood Christmas; a thankful thing since that was the only kind of Christmas available or that Will knew how to have.

The years brought with them a repeat of the same familiar, nostalgic traditions and rituals, like this very party or the winter carnival on Christmas Eve. Will found these dependable, softly simple Christmases to at least be pleasing in a down home way. But over the last few years, he'd started to secretly worry, as the near-identical Christmases came and went, time going faster the older he got. Every so-called "magic" Christmas Eve found Will romantically alone and yearning, wishing someone special could be by his side to hold his hand in front of the yule log channel, then go to the holiday sandcastle contest at Greer's Beach.

He and the kids were building their own little family but Rhett seemed hurt by the idea like Will was hurt by thinking about meeting someone someday that just wasn't Hannibal, no matter how good for him they might be. So…maybe Rhett felt bad, starting over with a new dad and abandoning the idea of his biological parents being his family. That must be hard to let go of, especially when Rhett's hormones were raging and he was in his mandatory Fourteen Emo phase. He already had a lot going on and a lot to adjust to.

"Rhett, thank you for coming," Will said warmly. He wasn't gonna ask for anything more.

His preteen son was wearing a defiantly chosen outfit, a vintage Metallica t-shirt, a pair of oversized black shorts with a silver biker chain, his absolute worst looking, mud-tinted high-tops, and of course, the crowning touch, a determined and seemingly implacable scowl. He'd also taken it upon himself to spend the fucking mall money at the jeweler's getting his nose pierced, but Will winced in sympathetic concern each time the boy sneezed and swore under his breath.

Rhett stared out the window with a studied expression of martyrdom.

Arriving at church, Will and the kids unloaded the stuff they'd agreed to bring on by, which were snowball cookies, peanut butter chocolate kiss ones that were Will's very favorite, and two big jugs of his prize cranberry-orange punch, clearly marked "NO BOOZE" and "DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT UNLESS YOU'RE OVER 21" in red sharpie on a crooked piece of masking tape, angrily slapped onto it. Will had enjoyed angry baking, angry cleaning, angry concoction of his delicious holiday beverage, and now angry light labor, hauling in these delicacies, along with some shit to raffle off.

He'd gone to the toy store and beauty counter at the apothecary and then at home sorta tossed most of the gift basket ingredients together helter skelter, swearing and sounding not at all

unlike Rhett. Bleary-eyed after too many hours of angry activities, he had explained to a baffled Savannah Jean and a highly amused Rhett that the baskets were gonna be fine (overstuffed with crooked items and bows on top that just…were weak. Not jaunty one bit. Shameful to bring to the Christmas Raffle at the damn Baptist's First).

S.J. and Rhett had sat down, redoing the baskets properly without a word, except for their same twin banter about school gossip, movies and songs, and of course mocking each other's crushes. Lots of "did not" - "did too," which cheered Will up as he drank a mug of coffee, thinking that Rhett never refused to help out with this type of work. He wasn't lazy or uncaring, just confused and scared.

Little by little, Will wanted to build the trust between them, not making some huge deal out of each thing the kid occasionally did that made him wanna cry into his black Folger's three days before Christmas when his heart was re-breaking over Hannibal Lecter. This was a delicate process; he was rebuilding, always, wondering if and when his life would feel complete, or he would feel he'd done enough and could rest a day.

After charging with a satisfying clomp of his boots down the Same Stairs Where They Had First…Will carried one of the punch containers to the drink table in the basement, which had been transformed for the evening from the "sad den of recovery" to a festive "church hall."

"May I offer any assistance, young man?"

Will struggled slightly to shove the jug onto the table, but he did it his damn self, knowing that voice like he knew his own in the dark.

He propped his chin miserably and ecstatically on top of the jug to make some snarky remark in greeting Hannibal, since at least then he'd be talking to him and looking at him. He kept nursing a dream of them dancing together later, like a soldier nurses his left arm that's been lost in the war.

All such witticisms, deadly and redeeming, died on Will's tongue. "What the hell?" he asked, staring at his ex dressed as the party's official Santa.

Proudly, Hannibal struck a rather good Ol' Saint Nick pose, hands on his hips, fake extra chubby belly stuck out, a noble but mischievous smile under the puffy white beard which Will knew well was attached in the back by a string. Still, he was convincing. Much more so than the usual contenders who had taken on the role in years past. He was kind of a natural choice.

"Ho, ho, ho, young man," Santa Hannibal declared in the stupidest fucking jolly voice ever, "Merry Christmas. Have you been–"

"Stop right there," Will groaned.

He pointed at his ex as lots of townsfolk kept piling in for the party, admiring all the food and raffle stuff that was out so far, the dj setting up in a corner fiddling with unreliable speakers.

The din around them was so Christmassy and happy, it turned his stomach like he was the Grinch. He didn't want to be this guy, this holiday hater, this bah humbug -hearted–

"Don't ask me if I've been good or naughty this year like I bet you've been gearin' up to do since you got the part. Did Pauline set you up for this?"

Hannibal looked mistily at Will, who was wearing his holiday typical, an ugly sweater vest with lots of cheesy reindeer, santas, snow people and candy canes on it, a white t-shirt under it, his Good Jeans and Sunday Shoes. His beard was freshly trimmed and he smelled of piney aftershave; his hair was neatly styled, the curls pushed back from his brow. He wondered what Hannibal wore under that stifling suit – wait, *was* he wearing anything?

"Pauline was indeed the merry instigator," Hannibal revealed with a conspiratorial sparkle in his eyes and a contented smile. "For which I'm very grateful. I need to stay busy."

Will nodded. Taking the Santa job was a big thing. You had responsibilities. Hannibal would soon be reading a story for the littlest kids and then asking what they all wanted for Christmas.

Damn honorable of Hannibal to take the job at the last minute. Will had expected one of the other committee members' husbands to step in and not do a great job, just better than no Santa. This was a grand Santa with a fancy accent and everything.

"I guess it's good of you to do this. Just, please– don't try and Santa-flirt with me again." He crossed his arms.

Hannibal continued examining his terrible sweater vest, trying in vain to understand its jumbled, badly colored design. "You're desperately anticipating my next attempt to Santa-flirt, Will. You don't even hide it well. Lovely sweater, incidentally."

"No I ain't. And shut up, every committee member wears an ugly sweater vest, it's tradition. Pauline even has one on over that Jessica Rabbit number that will have Grady useless the whole party, drooling like they haven't been together since Jesus was in swaddling clothes."

The twins brought in the gift baskets and plunked them on the table carelessly, looking around for their teen cohorts from school, the detention club, as it were.

Meantime, Santa Hannibal stepped forward and introduced himself, with a wink, as an old friend of their father wishing them a very merry Christmas, ha ha ha ho ho ho. Rhett snatched the candy cane he offered with a shrug, surprisingly not mocking. "You're a pretty convincing Santa, old friend of Will's. See you around."

He unwrapped the candy and put it in his mouth like it was a cigarette. S.J. took one as well, asking a few questions about where Dr. Lecter was from and what he had planned for Christmas, how did he know Dad. The vague answers were accordingly bestowed by two anxious exes, but she seemed as satisfied as Cindy Lou Who being told the Christmas tree needed a few small repairs at the North Pole.

“Cool. I hope your uncle feels okay for the holidays and y’all have a nice one,” Savannah Jean said politely. She wasn’t used to Manners and still followed such attempts with a formal, low curtsey learned at the Finishing School run by the local ballet teacher. She’d pined after that class until Will noticed and enrolled her.

Instead of cracking up and making fun of the curtsy as her brother would if he was around, Hannibal said in sincere admiration, “That was a beautiful curtsey, Savannah Jean. You’re quite the lady this evening.”

“Aw, stop, Santa,” S.J. giggled, waving him off, unconsciously having picked up some of Will’s unique physical habits, like instigating high fives when something went well and this hand wave of “aw shucks” disguised as “shut it” but cordially.

Grady’s family arrived, with Pauline leading the pack in a wonderfully atrocious vest that somehow did not ruin the look of her pretty dress. Worn open, it didn’t cover the lines of it. Of course, Grady was hanging on her every word. The kids were excited and all started talking to S.J. before they ran to get Rhett.

“See ya bud,” Grady said to Will in a pathetically dreamy way, following Pauline like that cartoon mouse that floats on the aroma of cheese until he gets to the big wedge of swiss.

“Yep.” Will sighed in annoyance and adjusted the way the raffle baskets were sitting, until it looked nice.

“Does Pauline and Grady’s longterm love and sturdy marriage interfere with your determined belief that love is essentially doomed or a lie?” Santa Hannibal lingered on the other side of the raffle table, making Will want to lob one at his head.

“Shut up, Santa.”

“Those are very handsome baskets. Did you and the children put those together?”

Will couldn’t help perking up after all their hard work getting ready for the party. “Think so? Well, I bought all this stuff, figurin’ everyone who enters is either a kid or the kind of person who enjoys apple cinnamon scented candles and body wash. Threw in a few beef jerky packs just in case, and there’s gift certificates for the ice cream parlor and…”

His explanation trailed off. “Yes?” Santa Hannibal prodded, genuinely intrigued.

Just because it was Will talking. It still made him sweat, and he wasn’t the one with the big, hot Santa suit on. Um, not that *Hannibal* was hot, of course, but the suit would make him overheated. Right.

(Hannibal was still sexy-hot, even in that dumb get-up. Fuck Will’s life)

“Meat ‘n Eat,” he finished, the mild mortification of any potential sexual innuendo entering a discussion already made tense with repressed feelings fading instantly. For some reason, it made him laugh, maybe because Hannibal did, too. “It’s not as bad as the name makes it

sound," he reasoned, adjusting a big gingham ribbon on the cellophane tie of a basket. "They have, uh. Ribs. Okay, it's as bad as it sounds."

They laughed again, and then Magnolia, Wyatt and P.J. showed up, Will's own kids following them, instead of attaching themselves to the other Fourteen Emo And/Or Hippies sitting on the stage passing around a bottle of black nail polish and a stick of eyeliner.

"Nice to see y'all hanging out," Will declared, smiling, "What brings this on?"

"Oh, nothin' Uncle Will." Wyatt wore the guilty-because-he-was-lying / excited because he was lying for a good reason and for good intentions look Grady had on when he stole moonshine from his uncle's barn distillery and snuck it into Joanne Leigh Raleigh's nineteenth birthday fete.

"Just wonderin' if you and Uncle Hannibal are gettin' along swimmingly tonight." P.J. said with a smile that looked a little too conniving, but just baffled an already overwhelmed and brain-stuffed Will. She adjusted her glasses. "So good to see you two talking together, not bitterly cussin' each other or glarin'."

"What?" Will snorted. "Of course we're still bitter and glaring. Or it was a temporary blip. None of y'all's business, you hear? Are y'all up to something?"

"Why, of course not," Magnolia giggled, jumping up and down. "Uncle Hannibal, Uncle Hannibal, are you gonna read the Polar Express soon?"

"Of course," Santa Hannibal remembered, distracted by Will and the ongoing apparent schemes of the children. "I am only in need of the book itself and the small bells I'll be distributing, and then I will be ready to proceed."

"Is it true you make pancakes in over fifty flavor variations, and you're rich?" Rhett broke in curiously.

"Rhett, it's a bit uncouth to ask someone if they're rich," Will sighed.

"Yeah, okay, but who gives a flyin'? Are you offended, Dr. Lecter?" Rhett asked, as if testing him, a candidate for some job he would give or refuse approval for. Weird.

"No indeed." Santa Hannibal gave him an extra candy cane. He was…bribing Rhett to like him! Ugghh, Will would wring his neck later – they were not —- gonna ever be co-parents!

"Awesome." Satisfied with his inquiry, Rhett continued, with the studied eloquence of an amateur but quite ambitious young actor, "Dr. Lecter, the books and props are all kept in the storage closet, just through that door," and pointed with unnecessary flourish.

"Ohhhkay," Will said, like a computer that kept freezing up. "Thanks. C'mon, Old Saint Pain in the Butt, I need to get in there anyway to grab the raffle tickets."

"You should do that, Uncle Will," said P.J. sagely. "The raffle is super important. I for one have my eye on the classic literature basket and the Old Spice bouquet basket which would make a great present for Daddy."

“She’s gonna buy extra tickets with her allowance from never swearing,” Wyatt frowned, “Unfair.”

“It is not unfair,” P.J. sniffed. “If you stop fussin’ about it, maybe I’ll put several tickets in the popcorn and movies and arcade pass basket. Saw you lookin’ at it.”

“I guess I don’t have a choice except be civil to you, then,” Wyatt said in disappointment. “On Christmas and everything…”

“Have fun goin’ to the closet,” Magnolia giggled again, showing off the gap where her front teeth had fallen out before they were collected by the tooth fairy.

“Um. Sure. See you in a bit, Mags.” Will strode off with Santa Hannibal following too cheerfully.

Upon entering the hall containing three closets and one of the reverend’s preparation rooms, Hannibal tried to give Will a candy cane from the seemingly endless supply in the sack he carried.

“I suspect you want Santa’s candy cane this Christmas, young man,” Hannibal teased, his rumbling voice touching those little places inside Will that were reserved only for him, even when he was literally being the biggest dumbass in the whole world, the cheesiest, too.

“I don’t want Santa’s Candy Cane,” Will lied, pushing the symbolic offering away haughtily. “Now, just help me find all this stuff…”

They went in the closet and quickly found the large basket of raffle tickets, plus the supplies for Santa’s Story. The bells jingled when Hannibal brought down the plastic bin containing many of them. A pretty sound that made Will feel briefly like a kid again. Not the foolish teenager offering his body, heart and soul to a mysterious stranger too old for him, but the kid before that, long before that, before Earl, before life made him so goddamn nervous and mistrusting. A real kid. But then, Will wasn’t too sure if it was the magic he felt between him and Hannibal, sexy but honest and innocent in its own way, or Christmas making him get all up in his worst feels like that. It might be both.

Just about ready to head back to the party, the two exes were alarmed by the closet door slamming behind them, then the quick jerk of the lock twisting on the outside.

“Hey!” Will yelled, “Hey, let us out, we’re in here–”

Even Santa Hannibal looked concerned. It was a medium-sized closet, with shelves on either side. Not enough to bring on immediate claustrophobia, but hardly up to Dr. Lecter’s sublime aesthetic expectations.

“Who is that?” Hannibal called, to which the answer was a familiar peal of giggles.

“Savannah Jean?” Will’s face scrunched up in fury. “Young lady, you unlock this door right now.”

“It’s for y’all’s own good!” P.J,’s superior, knowledgeable voice intoned, with the added echo of the hallway making her tone extra crisp.

“What the –” Will pounded the door, “Y’all are in huge trouble, coal for Christmas trouble!”

“No, the two of you will be, unless you use the Magic of Christmas to love each other again.”

“Pauline Junior, please.” Will sighed dejectedly. She really had her whole holiday-kid heart set on this nonsense. “We don’t want to spend the party in a small space together, we’re in some kinda toxic holdin’ pattern that’s doin’ just fine without y’all turning into little meddling cupids.”

His daughter argued, “Dad, you specifically told me and Rhett that toxic relationships are unhealthy, and you either gotta get out or work it out.”

“This isn’t the Saw franchise, S.J.! We’re good with gettin’ out. Now, please. Please? Honey?”

“Speak for yourself,” said Santa Hannibal loftily. “The closet may not be my chosen venue, but I don’t disagree with the children’s notion altogether. Kindly stop speaking for me. I prefer to work it out.”

“Aw, *shut up*, Jane Fonda Santa, we ain’t got shit to work out….except all that unresolved stuff…that should stay in the past anyway. C’mon, before we suffocate on the fumes of your ego.” He started trying to knock the door down, only for the girls to laugh again, musically.

“Good luck with that, Dad.”

“S.J., the music’s gonna start soon, let’s go,” P.J. was invigorated by the Christmas Spirit. The two exes exchanged we’re-screwed glances.

“P.J. and S.J.,” Hannibal called, “You’ve made your point. I think it best to release me for the story-telling lest the innocent tots be disappointed by my unexplained absence…”

“Let *you* out, not a damn word about letting me out?” Will shook his head, “You are such a traitorous snake.”

“Every man for himself, darling. You won’t be reasonable, and I have a job to do. Unless you wish to reunite and rekindle our love here and now? Or have a real conversation?”

“Kids?” Will banged on the door with both fists. His knee and shoulder hurt from the failed battering ram attempts. “*KIDS?*”

“How inconvenient,” said Hannibal curtly. He began searching the closet with a focused expression.

“Okay, not a bad idea - look for somethin’ that can pick the lock,” Will nodded, joining the hunt, scouring shelves full of fake ivy, valentines’ garlands, Easter hardcovers, bingo cards and pamphlets advising on how to break out of bad patterns involving anger, alcohol and drugs, or porn addiction.

Betty Mabel Riggins had insisted the Reverend institute the latter group because of her husband's obsessed proclivity for Pornhub. However, the group had since become a sort of viewing discussion group in which recently viewed porn videos could be dissected and assessed for quality in performers, choreography and directing aspects, as if the members were in a book club. The almost collegiate tone of the whole enterprise had led the Reverend to drop in on a few meetings "to drop off donuts" and learn a few things about recent trends in love-making.

The porn movie critique and philosophizing club brochure fell from the shelf and fluttered elegantly down onto Santa Hannibal's lap. "Ah."

"I'm not a member," Will pointed at him. "Keep your head in the game. This one." He pointed at the head supposedly containing his brain even as Hannibal's sultry, teasing expression and the slight prodding of his tongue against the inside of his cheek suggested his thoughts had gone where Will's had, the gutter.

And all it took was the mention of some kind of sex? They weren't that young and stupid anymore, surely. He could barely hold back the sudden urge to attack Santa Hannibal with kisses despite the ridiculous beard, the "candy cane" not having left his mind lately.

He had to get out of there.

"Hmm. As it happens, I'm not looking for a lock-picking implement, I'm looking for – this." Hannibal's search had led him, despite constant searching glances at Will on other silent topics, to a magnetic key holder. Opening it confidently, he discovered an extra set of keys to all the rooms in the church.

"Really? A key to the closet inside the closet? What's the Reverend…"

"It's perfectly sound logic. Obviously the Reverend does not care to meet the same fate which nearly imprisoned us."

Cleverly, he identified the correctly shaped key for the lock in question and let them out of the closet. "Don't be too hard on the children, Will." Hannibal put a hand on Will's elbow, noticing his "warpath" expression.

"I suggest," said Will, shoving the plastic bin of jingling bells into his red, fuzzy material-covered arms. He bet Santa Hannibal gave the best hugs and it was making him even grumpier. "You get. If you're so concerned about the – children." He tried to push Santa Hannibal towards the main party room, finding him immovable, smugly so.

"In my own time, beloved."

With a sly, pleased smile at his physical prowess and unbestowed Best Hugs and Candy Cane, Santa Hannibal strolled off to the party in his own damn time.

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“Uncle Will,” P.J. sighed in despair, hands clashed in front of her ugly sweater vest, which as an honorary committee member she wore with great pride, “What in land sakes are you doin’ out of the closet?”

She had turned away from organizing a group of children playing board games as if in the middle of a business meeting.

Will could hardly believe the bad pun or the irony, both of which eluded his niece. “I’ve been out of the closet for a pretty long time. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have been matchmade into the closet with my ex-somethin’ by my supposedly loyal goddaughter.”

“But it’s–”

Will rubbed his mouth anxiously. The party seemed to sway. She wouldn’t dare. “Don’t say it–”

“It’s *Christmas*, Uncle Will…” P.J. gave him her most winning “big emoji eyes” look.

Will immediately regretted being negative with P.J. no matter what she did. “Aw, never mind, I’m sorry. You were only trying to help, what’s more loyal than that?”

He noticed Magnolia and Wyatt chatting intensely over a contentious game of Monopoly. “Y’all fighting over Broadway there, or maybe plottin’ to get me married by New Years?”

“Married!” Magnolia’s face lit up, frustration over the Community Chest forgotten. “Can I be a flower girl?”

“May I do one of the readings?” P.J. volunteered. “Wyatt will do the other.”

“I’m not doin’ any reading.” Wyatt rolled the dice and his eyes. “Dammit, back to Jail again?”

“Darn it,” Magnolia corrected him, humbly taking her turn again.

“I ain’t wearin’ a suit,” said Rhett, who had appeared fresh from the buffet table. He and Savannah Jean were both juggling overflowing plates of dinner food and Solo cups of It Better Be The Correct Punch. “Or would y’all get married in the woods, casual style?”

“Barefoot,” S.J. suggested. “How romantic…”

Will closed his eyes. “We are not gettin’-- that’s it, I give up. At least everyone’s happy and gettin’ along. If I have to endure a little schemin’ in exchange, guess that’s a good enough Christmas present.”

“Splendiferous,” P.J. declared, looking out of the corner of her eye at a few misbehaving toddlers who were using the game tokens to just throw, like they weren’t much too valuable for that.

“Small ones,” she cooed with artificial patience, “Storytime is gonna start soon. Santa got freed up earlier than we all planned.”

“Don’t lock us in any more closets, and don’t manipulate any other circumstances to try and make us ‘face our feelings,’” Will ordered, giving them each a stern look and putting up air quotes. “Enjoy the dinner and real estate.”

“Enjoy repressin’ your feelings!” Rhett called like a know-it-all.

“Chew with your mouth shut, Rhett.” Will took comfort in the realization of how much the two of them finally sounded like a dad and his son.

***

Will had not intended to pay any attention to Storytime with Santa Hannibal, naturally he had not, and was planning to do anything else, like manage the already well-manned raffle table, have a couple cups of The Adult Punch and eat his feeling’s worth of church casseroles and gingerbread which had already been photographed for the contest, the cookies shaped like everything from the usual stuff to angels in trees (get it?) or big blue ribbons saying “choose me.”

However, he accidentally just happened to, did he mention to himself *totally on accident* with innocent naivete on par with that of Magnolia, pass by the Children’s Room, where parents dragged their screaming, anti-establishment, possibly early agnostic offspring during services. The room normally contained a few random, used toys, kids’ books and a felt board set of Adam and Eve that was a little too anatomically accurate.

This time, even the overly phallic, smirking felt serpent couldn’t compete with the tempting man playing Santa and reading in the most adorably serious, tender voice. Hannibal had a captive audience of kids, actually of all ages, and each of them had been given a bell on a red ribbon bow.

“Now, if you each give that bell a little shake, you will see if you still believe in me,” Santa Hannibal announced with Oscar-worthy gravitas. “Or if you have lost that faith in miracles that makes me possible.”

Here, he pointed at his nose and waited with great interest to hear the result.

The kids all rang their bells, filling the small room with a pretty cascade of sparkling music. The sound was so pure, somehow.

“I knew it!” some of the kids said, clapping their hands excitedly, while others just said, “Of course. I can’t believe some people don’t think you’re real, Santa.”

“I will always remain real and here for you, all year, every year, no matter if you believe in me or not.” Hannibal grinned, passing each kid a coloring book and four-pack of crayons. “I will always believe in you.”

As the kids crowded around Santa and the sound of squealing feedback from the speakers changed suddenly to “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” courtesy of a very relieved d.j., Will stayed, watching Hannibal rather than the couples and other children dancing behind him.

Hannibal hadn't noticed Will listening in, hovering just out of mutual eyeshot. He wasn't putting on a show only for Will's benefit. There wasn't a note of deceit in any of what he said.

Will felt so weak and wanted to cry. He had wandered just as accidentally on purpose into that strange mood where the old Christmas songs' lyrics and the narrative of *The Polar Express* seemed to have meaning.

When Santa Hannibal was done with his shift, he left the room with a bold and jolly "Ho, ho, ho," while the kids all ran past him. They would have knocked a smaller man over but Hannibal was sturdy enough to take it. And he kept going, his endearing ego coming out, "Ho ho ho, Meeeerrryy Christmas," in that perfect, booming Santa tone.

"What a good Santa," said Pauline as she walked by with Grady practically carrying her dress train. "I couldn't have asked for a better St. Nick, friend. Keep up the good work!"

"Thank you, young lady," Hannibal declared, hooking his thumbs into the furry front of his red coat with another hearty "Ho, ho — oh!"

"I need to talk to you," Will interrupted, having tugged his elbow. "It's urgent."

"Of course, young man. Have you repented your lack of Christmas spirit already?"

Will didn't answer; he just grabbed one big, white gloved hand and led Santa on, through the crowd of dancers right back to the closet. On the way he muttered things like "*gotta be out of my mind, but we knew that*" "*this* is the guy I can't get over" and "*goddamn Santa, of all things…*"

Then he gestured towards the closet to Hannibal, who walked in looking beyond confused. "Will?"

Will smirked, it was his turn this time, and locked the door behind them, in possession of the only key not purloined by the small chaotic-good cupids. He put the key on the nearest shelf and answered in his sluttiest voice, with the slutty eyebrow raise, "Call me '*young man*' again, Santa."

"Pardon me?" Hannibal was utterly shocked. "Are you suggesting…"

Will yanked his fake beard down and kissed him hard, which was instantly reciprocated. "Mmm," he murmured heatedly, putting a hand down Hannibal's soft red pants at the same time his ex slid his own fingers down Will's jeans to tease his hole and squeeze his ass. "Fuck, fuck, fuck–"

"What is happening or –" *kiss, kiss, kiss*, "Not happening?" Hannibal demanded breathlessly as Will undid the cord of his pants and shoved them down before doing the same with his jeans.

Hannibal groaned at the sight of his hard-on and kissed him again before biting his neck with a growl.

“Oh, God, yes,” Will whispered fiercely. He tugged at the stupid Santa jacket, then struggled with the fake tummy, which blocked them from grinding. Yanking it away with a panting curse, he tried to explain, “I really need you right now, if it’s okay with you,” *kiss, bite, lick*, both of their mouths going faster now as hands wandered and hair was tugged, as the Santa beard fell away. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask you before kissing you and touching, but –”

“That’s – not a problem,” Hannibal squeezed his eyes shut with a groan. Will had gone down on his knees, right there in the closet of the church, for goodness sake! This made it extra dirty past your standard semi-public sex, while secure since no one else could get in anyway.

Hannibal at this point had been stripped of everything except the hat, which Will told him gruffly “leave it on.”

“Do you want me, too?” Will laughed gently, losing his breath again at the sight of Hannibal’s cock standing to bold attention, achingly in need of touch. “I mean, you look like you–”

Hannibal grabbed Will’s face and pushed his dripping cock into his mouth with a Lithuanian sentiment that sounded even filthier than usual. Quickly thrusting into Will’s waiting mouth and moaning softly, he combed his loving fingers through Will’s curls.

“I want you,” he finally said when Will pulled his mouth off and licked his lips with a wicked grin. “You don’t – ever have to worry about that.”

“Even in this vest?”

“Especially, because you’ve been wearing this atrocious insult to the noble —“ *kiss, bite, moan* — “name of sweater vest— but I need it off you now…”

They kissed again, and Will used one hand shot out blindly to grapple with the first aid kit he’d seen during their earlier visit to this premises. In there, a small container of vaseline. And that would do just fine for two men this desperate.

Will’s breathy moans were barely possible to control when Hannibal kissed him with his perfect lips and touched him just the way he liked, opening Will fast as he could without hurting him worse than necessary. A little hurt had to be involved, they just couldn’t wait. The burn was more than worth it when Will sank down on his cock, arms around his neck, Hannibal sitting on a step-stool. He felt absolutely impaled; the pain rolled through him in a wave of pleasure so deep he knew he needed this – the way it hurt to love Hannibal and to give himself again, the way it made his head spin and his heart gallop and his whole world light up. The way he didn’t have a choice anymore.

Hannibal held onto his waist, gripping and enjoying with visceral fetish the delicate smallness of it above the round ass, kissing Will whenever they weren’t pulling back to watch Hannibal’s thick dick moving in and out with Will’s rocking hips. He rode Hannibal and stared into his eyes, put his hands on either side of his beautiful neck and listened to that slick, increasingly easy glide of them together. So raunchy and hot, but also filling his body with a profound, pounding pleasure that made it seem the only right thing to do when he felt this way.

And he felt this way so, so often.

He opened and opened, body and soul; Hannibal gave all he had once again, and Will gave it from himself. What was he going to do with all this love, pent up inside him festering forever, anyway? His life would be hollow. Even though Hannibal would go back to Baltimore and his new – not even new anymore – his *real* life, Will would remember how they rekindled this so wonderfully and had some incredible times together that healed the wounds of the past, but not the wound of love.

Twenty years thinking he needed that wound healed, when the truth was, he didn't want to live without it. He didn't know who he was without Hannibal.

"Yeah, yeah, Daddy, please–" Will's breath was hot on Hannibal's ear as he bit it, then leaned back and bounced harder, faster while his lover fucked up into him, "Right there, fuck, you're so good–" He wept and trembled as he came and tumbled into that tidal wave of pain and love, blissfully drowned, *letting* it happen.

"This was so, so naughty of you, young man," Hannibal growled as he went on fucking wildly into Will, clutching his ass and spanking.

The word choice drove Will crazy and made him come even fucking harder, spent but staying there letting Hannibal rut into him with those animal, panting moves, the harder spanking and being clutched to Hannibal's body for dear life. White hot pleasure seized Hannibal moments later and he spilled inside Will, warm and claiming. He held Will so damn tight and moved fast, slamming in and giving the younger man several more tremors of unbearable ecstasy while riding out his own.

Will stayed there for a few minutes straddling him, wanting him to be inside like that until they really had no choice but to disconnect their bodies. Sweat dotted his forehead under messy curls, he was still panting a bit, and his ass was going to be killing him for a while. Good. Next time they did it, it would hurt again. The thought made him delirious, feeling even more Hannibal's.

"Thank you," he grinned, running his fingers with affectionate lingering lust through Hannibal's chest hair, humming when the older man warmly kissed his forehead. His skin felt cold and hot at the same time, mood nice and heavy and dumb, relieved.

"For what in particular?" Hannibal smiled.

"Um, not saying, right before you came, '*I have a very special present for you.*'"

They both laughed and Hannibal admitted, "I thought about it."

Will felt more giddy amusement at the surreal ridiculousness of this situation, as he glanced at the rumpled Santa outfit on the floor, and then the mess of all the stuff that had fallen off the shelves with the force of their fucking.

"Hannibal, what if we had a week? What if we took the whole week?" Will pressed their foreheads together, listening to Hannibal breathe, feeling his heartbeat thudding so intensely

against his curious hand.

“I want much more than that, I want all your weeks.” Hannibal smiled almost shyly and added, “Ambitious as it may sound for a man who also nearly used the *big candy cane* line again, I think I can show you that I’m not going–”

“Anywhere” was interrupted by the sound of knocking and a church lady’s confused voice calling “hello?”

They stared, amber stuck on blue, hands clamped on each other’s mouths to keep the hysterical laughter in as their eyes watered over again, already red from tears of joy and need.

“Coulda sworn I heard a racket comin’ from that closet. Damn raccoons, for land’s sake, bane of this town….”

The woman, who might be Peggy Ann Buchanon or Frannie Jo Morganstern, they sounded pretty much the same, walked off with clicking heels, and the two lovers put themselves back together to whatever extent was possible.

“She’ll find Reverend Delmont and have him check it out, but he’ll be too chicken shit and pretend he had a duel with a nonexistent wild rodent before calling the exterminator who’s already here, so it’ll go to voicemail and they’ll forget anyway,” Will explained cheerfully, his voice a little less hoarse now.

His bright eyes and happy laugh made Hannibal have a hard time keeping hands and lips off of him, but Will giggled, “C’mon, you just fucked my brains out five minutes ago, ain’t you had enough?”

“Never. You don’t understand how beautiful you are, how indescribably so. Especially when you smile and look so free.”

Will straightened his Santa hat, admiring the build of him in a white undershirt and the red pants, plus suspenders that had a weirdly sexy look to them as well. Kinky.

He pulled at them playfully as he took a last kiss before they slipped from the closet. “You’re just saying that because I gave you the red light special.”

“Will,” Hannibal said with a shaky laugh.

The TLC song “Red Light Special” had happened to be playing on one sultry night That Summer, at a house party where they had locked themselves in the bathroom to fuck, not unlike what they’d just done twenty years later. Hannibal had strong associations of horniness towards the song ever since, and Will knew it.

“I’ll give it to you again later. The kids are sleeping over Grady’s. Bring the hat and the candy cane.”

They walked casually and slightly crookedly back to the party, where they danced so many times, inseparably, that the kids declared victory, each telling the others “I told you so” and “I knew they would end up dancing.”

“He was just too much of a sexy Santa for ya, wasn’t he, Will?” Delta Dawn danced by with Jenna Hathaway, as it seemed those two had finally figured out they were soulmates, obvious though it was. She winked and grinned, and Will did the same back.

Know what? You’re damn right,” Will laughed, thinking, hoping, pleading with second chances, destiny, every shred of good karma he might have worked up, *and he’s all mine.*

Chapter End Notes

**Next time:** Back to That Summer, the boys' affair and revelations galore...

# Justified

Chapter Summary

We're going back to 1993, where we left Hannibal and Will in an awkward encounter with the latter's despicable foster dad...

Perhaps you remember this conversation which our boys had at That Bar back in Chapter 9:

*“You just don’t want to talk about the past, much less reveal whatever crime you think that I committed, when in fact you are the one who chose that our separation should be permanent. I never would have–”*

*"Bullshit. And I never said you committed a crime, other than, you know..." Will leaned in, still holding off eye contact like a gift with which he was stingy as a defense mechanism. Hannibal accepted the small pleasure of proximity as Will whispered, "blueberry egg mcmuffin."*

*"Shhh," said Hannibal in concern, "don't speak of...b.e.m. in public, Will."*

Well...

Chapter Notes

**cw:** Remember when I mentioned that Will and Hannibal still become Murder Husbands in a sense, even though Hanni isn’t the Ripper and this AU is quite different otherwise? Well, here we go. Canon-typical violence, drug references and a villain who spews some very rough and sexually charged language at our teen Will.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Then. Hannibal.**

“And you brought a friend,” Earl observed, looking for all the world like the resident comic book villain of Angel Wood, as if Alan Moore had turned up and painted him dark and venomous and all too real right on the already oppressive summer night air.

Earl was that scary vapor one only sort of sensed creeping behind, right before it closed in with a suffocating fury.

Will leveled his foster dad with an exhausted look while willing the universe, begging really, for him to just shut up and go sell his freaking drugs already.

“Who’s this, Will?” Earl tried to put an arm around Will like he was any kind of a real dad.

Like he was proud of his boy and showed him off when making new acquaintances in some polite alternate universe where the whole place was built on pure sarcasm.

That creepy, oily hand on his shoulder made Will immediately evade it with a low sound of disgust, stepping away as Hannibal’s darkening eyes tracked the movements, looking more concerned and then angry as the moments ticked by in Earl’s presence.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Will sighed, “But Hannibal is my friend from church. I told you about the meeting I went to earlier, remember? Didn’t expect you to be here at this time, said you had that delivery in–”

“Obviously you didn’t expect your old dad to be around, seein’ as you stumbled here lookin’ guilty as sin with a guy who looks about thirty. Do most church meetin’s go on ‘til two am?”

Hannibal, who had put his hand out in the barest show of common civility, now put it back down. There was not going to be a handshake. He was glad of it, not wanting that clammy grip he knew would be involved. His eyes darted back and forth between foster father and son while they argued.

“You’re not my dad,” Will insisted. “And to repeat, since maybe you’re hard of hearin’ all of a sudden, me and Hannibal, we’re just friends. We stayed after the meeting and helped with takin’ down the sets for the school play that were still in the church hall. And then we fell asleep for a while.”

“Riiiiight. So that measly explanation, if you wanna call it that, means I oughta sit back while you slut yourself all over town with anything that moves. You makin’ a little side hustle on me?”

Hannibal’s jaw dropped. It wasn’t only what Earl said, which was appalling enough, but it was Will’s totally blase reaction; he was more annoyed than offended. He was used to being spoken to that way. Hannibal flexed his hand as it automatically tightened to a fist at the very thought.

“Stop that, you won’t talk to Will that way. Don’t say another word, I’m warning you,” Hannibal said icily.

Will sighed, “Shhh, don’t…”

He looked grateful, but stressed about Hannibal’s safety. Of course, that’s all Will cared about. Hannibal’s heart felt broken and too big for his chest at the same time.

Earl laughed. He seemed to remember he had a glass of whiskey on ice dangling from one thin and dirty hand, and belatedly swigged some to celebrate his own jokes. He wasn’t only

putting Will “in his place,” or insulting him, but he was having fun. This was an unexpected bit of entertainment.

Still, there was a deeper level of scorn and resentment that worried Hannibal the most. Earl really hated Will for some bizarre, inconceivable reason.

“Where’d you pick up Dr. Charmin’ here, standin’ on the corner of main street hikin’ up your booty shorts?” Earl snorted another laugh, his nose looking red from doing lines earlier.

Will glared at his foster father and retorted dryly, “No, Earl, I haven’t opened up a brothel of sin to save up money for college.”

“Sure as fuck wouldn’t surprise me if you did. Seems you live to defy me, so’s if I want somethin’ from you, you’re more’n likely to go give it to someone else and make my profit off of it. In this case, letting this rich-ass spoiled brat from the Chateau take you home and probably fuck you on my couch–”

“I advise you to shut your mouth, sir, before I save you the trouble,” Hannibal warned. The words were deceptively mild; he was almost too full of rage to form them, or remember how to express himself in English.

He was stopped by a pleading look from Will and the boy’s pale, slender hand on his middle, pressing him to say again, “don’t.”

Hannibal didn’t need more trouble with Angel Wood law; he’d been arrested once already for fighting, and he’d tarnish the family reputation while maybe getting charges that would stick on his record this time, threatening his career in medicine. But he was putting Will so far ahead of his own concerns that only the boy’s wide-eyed, silent begging saved Earl for the moment.

“Will,” Hannibal warned, shaking his head. “I want to do what you feel is best in this case, I don’t want trouble any more than you do, but this is beyond egregious. You really believe I’ll stand to hear you spoken to that way?”

“It don’t matter, Hannibal, let him go off, then he’ll slink away somewhere,” Will whispered intensely, “I can’t lose you now. I can’t have you carted off by the cops while this asshole pretends you dealt him some near-mortal injury or other, ‘cause that’s exactly what he’ll fuckin’ do.”

Earl cackled, “Hahaha, yeah, you’re in enough trouble chasin’ goddamn trailer trash jailbait out in the swamplands while Uncle Robertus up on the high hill goes around town braggin’ on his amazing nephew the future doctor, his heir. You get busted ‘round here, pervert, you can forget the inheritance and the rep, so shut your snobby trap threatenin’ me!” Earl laughed hysterically, though the bitter edge to it scared even Hannibal.

“Sure, Earl, that’s right,” Will said, using both hands to hold Hannibal back by now as his lover’s face had turned beet red and he was ready to fly at Earl any second now, fists and teeth bared. “We’re havin’ us a torrid affair. You caught us, woo-hoo! But gosh, I got a lotta shit on you, too, Earl, so – hey, your truck’s all full of fuckin’ drugs, so why not leave us be

in all our awful sinful prostitution and defilin', and go do your business? We ain't botherin' you none, c'mon, now. Call it even. I don't tell, like always, and you don't tell on us."

Earl gave Will a hard look and laughed coarsely. "Suppose you got a point about the merch, I need to get this stuff delivered 'fore light of day, and that ain't far off."

He stumbled towards the truck. At this point, Will and Hannibal both hated him enough not to bother cautioning him he was too high and drunk to drive. From what Will had said conversationally, Hannibal already knew Earl had driven in such a state plenty of times, and only the backroad routes he took and some kind of insanely effective survivor's streak in him had kept the man from certain death thus far. Hannibal narrowed his eyes as a sneer twisted his lip. He hoped tonight was the night Earl's luck ran out forever.

The dealer was still babbling his cruel, despicable tangents as he headed for his truck. "Openin' your thighs for this rich fucker, right before he gives you what, a fifty dollar bill for your trouble? Cause no one ever looked more like a fuckin' John than this motherfucker right here, and no brat kid was ever more of a whore-lookin' little thing than you…."

"He's almost gone, just – let him *go,* Hannibal, I'm begging you," Will repeated, squeezing his arm as if to return him to reality. "I know you're seein' red right now–"

"Will, you have no idea. None at all." Hannibal's jaw tightened so much, it hurt.

Earl made the mistake of deciding he hadn't had enough fun or vengeance yet, whatever it was all about in his rotten excuse for a mind, Hannibal didn't even care anymore. He came back towards the two younger men again, pointing his finger, keys jangling, ice clinking in his once again forgotten glass.

"Know what, no, you ain't runnin' me off so easy. I can get some profit outta this anyway, look at you out here doin' this fuckin' teenager like you ain't even ashamed of yourself…"

Hannibal stepped directly in front of Will, protectively blocking him even from Earl's view. His expression was stony, his eyes flint dark. Earl glared at Hannibal's aristocratic features and unchanged superior attitude, maybe most of all how he protected Will.

"You owe Will an apology," said Hannibal in a low hiss, "And certainly the privilege of personal space and to conduct himself as the wonderful young man he he is, free from your foul and hateful influence. Please do as you intended and leave at once, before I'm forced to take any further action."

"The fuck?" Earl doubled over laughing, "Look at this clown you're galavantin' around with, Will, what the hell're you doin' with this museum exhibit nerd? He sure don't fit in around here, and you got Angel Wood swamp water runnin' through your veins. You know it won't last, and I know you ain't supposed to be fuckin' no thirty year old European, fancy and rich or not. Mine's one of the more understandin' reactions you're gonna get on this whole thing, boy."

"Will," Hannibal said, firmly and smoothly, trying to do as he'd been asked, even as it killed him. "I'll walk you to the door. Earl, I'm quite sure you have other matters to attend to, given

that your truck is running and you've only just loaded it up with this evening's grand assortment of reputable goods."

Hannibal was sure this was his last chance to actually leave this encounter without committing murder, and he gave Earl the chance *only* at Will's urging.

Will took Hannibal by hand and led him to the door.

"Okay, almost there, we'll go in and lock the door and he'll leave, and it'll be fine, just don't – ah, ah, no, no," Will turned Hannibal around when he tried to go back and beat Earl to a pulp. He pushed him at the house, feeling cartoonishly tiny in the endeavor.

"Will, please," Hannibal urged, certainly under no obligation to move based on Will's loving shoves, but still torn between his lover's pleas and his own need for justice, for protecting Will's honor. "This is beyond anything I imagined – this is so –"

Earl had his own opinions. "Oh, I'll be on my way when I fuckin' say so, you overgrown Doogie Howser, stick up your ass teen-fucker. Who the fuck gave you the right to judge me?"

"Shit, he did wayyy too much coke tonight, Hannibal. I'm scared; he's worse than usual, let's get the fuck inside, now," Will muttered as Earl made a crooked path in their direction.

"Come inside, then," Hannibal murmured protectively, more shocked as the situation kept worsening, and he took Will in quickly before locking the door.

"This is *my house*, idiots! I got a fuckin' *key,* goddammit, wastin' my time, you're gonna answer for this, boy, while you're under my roof disobeyin' and disrespectin' me!"

Hannibal held the door shut with a vice grip, making it hard for Earl to unlock the it with the young doctor's strong hand clamped around the knob on the other side.

"Fuckin' outsider rich dirtbag scum," Earl stormed, and there was a silence, wherein Will waited with Hannibal in the dark tv den (basically a pig stye).

"We ain't worth more of an effort," Will whispered, as if to convince himself. Hannibal's gaze on him was incredibly tense. "I bet he'll go fuck off now on his nightly errands, he has a large clientele in–"

A brick went through the window, narrowly missing Hannibal; both he and Will jumped back. It was quickly followed by an enraged Earl, who had gotten a burst of adrenaline when the "locked out of his own house" thing set off his completely unearned macho pride.

He used a rag around his hand to avoid getting cut and stumbled in, but fast and with violent intent, his uncoordinated movements clashing with the poison in his eyes that seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

It was nothing good, "fuck fuck fuck," Will muttered, this was bad, this was terrifying.

Hannibal's own adrenaline spiked so high, he could barely breathe. All that ran through his veins was to keep Will safe as he had failed to protect his sister years before. No one would

ever hurt Will. Not Will, no matter what it cost Hannibal, no matter what he had to do. He'd tear this vile boar limb from limb, he'd –

Will was panicking; Hannibal could actually smell how much, and could not allow his attentions to be divided from protecting him. He didn't know what to do, especially given that Earl held the rag-hand up to show he had taken a large shard of shining window glass to use as an impromptu knife.

"Go ahead and insult me again, rich pervert," he said to Hannibal, glowering and gesturing with the gleaming shard. "Or you, useless trash slut so-called son, go on and tell me where to go now, huh? Not so brave."

"You'll never hurt this boy while I breathe air," Hannibal snarled, body-shielding Will again. "This is your final warning to back down."

"Perfect, so all we need to do is get you to quit breathin' air," Earl replied acidly.

"Earl, shut up, back off!" Will screamed, clawing at Hannibal's back, "Hannibal, look out, he ain't fuckin' around. We gotta get out of here, now!"

"Shh, love," Hannibal said. He had suddenly changed. Like a switch went off in his head. "You're safe. I have this. Just stand back and you'll be perfectly fine."

Hannibal was cold, calm, composed. He spoke to Will very sweetly and in a soothing way, but he looked at Earl as if he was nothing more than dead meat too rancid to be thrown in the garbage, so vile it had to be burned to ash and stomped out as if it never existed. What he really thought and felt towards Earl was far worse than he let on.

Earl pretended to launch himself at Hannibal, but then laughed like he'd only been teasing about using the glass shard knife. Hannibal remained fearless, insisting Will remain behind him, and only Will, meanwhile, saw his back muscles and biceps tightened; he could see veins bulging under the skin of his arms.

***

**Will.**

*He'd die for me*, Will thought in a horrified realization. *Hannibal would die for me. And he might.* He started to cry, going into hysterics, "Stop it, stop, Earl, go away, leave us alone, please!"

"Listen to that. You spoiled little hussy, you whore. Think I don't know? Showin' up all hours with some strange piece of too-old-for-you ass. He worth the price, huh, Dr. Fancy? Hmm? I doubt it. He's pretty, though, for such a scrawny thing. I got clients that like that type of boy, see. And Will, I told you to get your ass into that truck when I go out to work, and turn a few tricks to keep this fuckin' roof over our head. I told you to do your part, but *noooo*, you just kept avoidin' me until now it's summer and you figure, another month and you'll be eighteen, you can leave!"

“That’s right, I can, and I will!” Will sobbed, “Hannibal please don’t let him hurt you, don’t let him get close, let’s figure something out.”

Hannibal asked slowly, “What did you just say about Will? What did you just say to Will, in front of me?”

It was so much like Hannibal was a totally different person now, that it seemed he had forgotten Earl already said all this stupid, disgusting stuff outside, too, he was wasted out of his mind and repeating most of it. He had added only one new part, his previous attempt to get Will to turn tricks for his profit. And Will didn’t expect Hannibal to react well to that…

“I said,” Earl repeated again with reddened eyes and the shard held by his side too tightly, like he still wanted to use it, “that little shivering, weepin’ whore behind you should have turned tricks for my friends and customers and contributed to this goddamn household, ‘stead of clearly doin’ it for himself and keepin’ every penny. You owe me, you disgustin’, trashy, gross little – fuckin’ boy toy for whoever’ll pay up, and I’ll make you–”

It happened so fast. One moment, Earl was ranting at them. His tall figure hunched slightly from being out of his head, but eyes wild with cocaine and adrenaline-fueled rage. There was no focus, but such vile strength of intention to hurt, using words and anything else he could.

Earl looked awful, skinny, pale, sweaty with, like…that sick sweat, not just the heat, and he looked ugly, face twisted in such abusive hate.

That was the last look he ever had on his face.

Hannibal moved like the goddamn Terminator. Before Will fully registered what was even happening, he’d sort of karate-chopped Earl’s rag-covered hand that held the glass shard right down, hard. So that the makeshift weapon fell to the floor and Earl let out this real dumb sounding howl of anger and surprise.

The young doctor sneered, and his eyes were full of pure malice. Earl tried to grab his weapon back, but Hannibal had already snatched it from the floor, wielding it with the same cloth Earl had used. There wasn’t another second to think and feel at all warned before the glass shard was simply lodged right in Earl’s heart and Will’s foster dad was apparently dead, flat on his back, with blood oozing all over the place like a fuckin’ movie.

A horror movie.

“Hannibal,” Will said in shock, and no small amount of awe. “What the hell did you do to him?”

“He insulted you,” Hannibal growled, not sounding fully human. “For the last time.”

“Aww, Hannibal, it wasn’t worth – oh, God!”

Earl’s body was shuddering like a dead fish flopping.

“*Ew,*” Will cringed, “Is he supposed to do that? Thought he was dead.”

“He is probably about thirty seconds from death.” Hannibal’s voice was still so cold.

Nothing like the warmth of love in his eyes and voice when he was with Will and nothing like the fire in his lips and hands all over Will. He was a machine.

Earl’s eyes popped open, unseeing, and he tried blindly to grab Hannibal’s ankle in a sudden, last ditch attack, even as the light was in the process of going out of his eyes; it was nothing but horrible instinct, but still, Will just couldn’t take it any more.

He yanked the shard out of Earl’s chest, getting a blood spray all over him and jammed it into his neck this time. It felt good, and he felt a rush. Not like he expected to feel, even as he did the crazy things he did, killing his foster dad. Felt amazing.

“I think that oughta do it this time.” Will rolled his eyes, cool now, too. He and Hannibal felt more than ever like they belonged together. “Fuckin’ Earl. Hillbilly redneck waste of space. *Jesus*.”

He flopped down in Earl’s tv chair. “Just for insultin’ me, Hannibal, really?”

“You stabbed him as well,” Hannibal argued, out of breath.

Their eyes met. It wasn’t funny. A man died. They killed a man. Fresh, still-warm blood was all over them both, and on top of just having committed the absolute worst sin and crime of all, not even in fully justifiable self-defense, this was gonna be a total nightmare to cover up. If they even could.

Will laughed.

Hannibal laughed.

Then Hannibal collapsed on his knees and put his face in Will’s lap, and Will realized he was still in shock, so he ran his fingers through his beloved’s hair, slowly.

“You’re a little messed up in the head, huh?” he asked.

“More than a little. I know I’m still reeling from what occurred. I’ll stay here a few more minutes, and then we’ll start working out a plan to conceal our involvement in Earl’s death.”

“Okay, honey. I’m here.” Will smiled adoringly when Hannibal laughed again.

“It’s ridiculous,” he explained, arms wrapped around Will’s calves, face rubbing against Will’s thigh, comforting himself. “Ridiculous. All the times I wanted to kill Robertus in just such a way and never stood up to myself or made a move. Then someone insults you in front of me and never speaks another word again.”

“Good enough for him.” Will shrugged. “You gave him what, five chances to shut up? He practically volunteered to get stabbed.”

He felt numb about Earl. And passionately in love with Hannibal, his hero, more than ever.

That was a lot.

“Did he ever make you do that? What he mentioned -- in the past--” Hannibal asked suddenly, looking at Will as if he’d be happy to bring Earl back to life and kill him again even more painfully, if so.

He examined the hand Will had used to stab Earl, finding a cut there, nothing serious but deep enough he’d have to bandage it and pray to god Will’s blood hadn’t gotten on the body too much. And he clucked his tongue, pressing a handkerchief against it for now. “Will. Did he?”

“Did Earl make me sleep with his druggie friends for money? No. He was tellin’ the truth in sayin’ I’d been avoiding him for months; I have. It used to be that when our paths crossed just cause I needed food or drink from the kitchen or whatever, he’d lob a few insults at me, but it escalated to him yellin’ at me for no reason everytime. Then it was that he’d bang on my door at night accusin’ me of takin’ or wastin’ his ‘hard earned’ money and let me know I was gonna earn my keep.”

Will swallowed against the pain in his hand as Hannibal carefully tied the impromptu bandage around it, then kissed his hand reverently, listening.

“So,” Will explained, “I started not being here when I knew he would be, since his habits were, until tonight, predictable. I’d sleep at Grady’s or Charlie’s, or even outside in my sleeping bag, down by the river, if he was gonna be home. Otherwise, I never fuckin’ saw him anymore. Last time I saw him, it was the first night of Anger Management and I was out the door like a blur at the sight of him. Creepy dude, but also just so *mean*. For no good reason at all! Worst foster parent yet, I have to give it to him again.”

“You didn’t tell me the situation was that bad, Will. I…in a way I’m glad this happened. I could never have let you stay here even for a few more weeks, even with some small chance you might cross his path. You know you never deserved a word of the terrible things he said to you.”

“I know. Do you know you don’t deserve the terrible things your uncle says to you? And that you deserve to be loved, even by yourself?”

Hannibal hid his face in Will’s thigh and didn’t come out for a few seconds. He never answered Will’s question. When he did come up for air, he just sighed. “This isn’t going to be pleasant. But you indicated that this specimen of pond scum has his fair share of enemies?”

“Yup, sure did. I figure, let’s take the shard and cloth somewhere we can get rid of them. You get any of your blood or fingerprints on somethin’ other than the cloth there?”

“No, I didn’t. I never even touched him,” Hannibal marveled. “It happened before I realized what I was doing.”

“I get it. So, first, we disappear the evidence.”

“The shard is easy enough to shatter and dispose of,” Hannibal shrugged.

“We can burn the cloth,” Will decided. “Then…oh, I know. Let’s leave the damn truck like it is, loaded up. It could look like Earl was fixin’ to hightail it out of Louisiana with everyone else’s paid-for drugs. He knows at least ten people who’d kill him in cold blood for that.”

“I believe you.”

“But also – I probably got my blood on him when I stabbed his neck. Shit. And my hand is cut.”

“I’ll be your alibi and you’ll be mine for the night. We left the meeting, we – I suppose in the investigation, it will come to be known we were at that bar, which shouldn’t do much except to make our guilt in this crime seem less likely. We can make some excuse for being at the bar together. And it can be substantiated that you fell earlier, in the parking lot. The others from the meeting saw you land on your hands, and you might have done this on a bit of sharp rock or gravel.”

He lifted Will’s hand again, indicating the wound.

“Genius,” Will nodded. “I mean, except for–”

“We’ll have to cut his head off, unfortunately,” said Hannibal.

“Hannibal, you said that *way* too casually. Even for a guy who’s been to medical school.” Will let out a low whistle. “I guess that would solve the problem of my blood on his neck. We get rid of the head and neck…and the body’s here…we don’t have to worry about– hey! Hannibal! Wait.”

“Hmm?”

Will mimed slapping himself upside the head. “We – can just put him in his truck? Stick him in the damn driver seat, roll it off a cliff? What the fuck are we talkin’ about? Hannibal– now, look. I’m sorry you don’t get to chop his head off, but –”

Hannibal sighed. “No, it’s alright, Will. Admittedly, I’m still feeling extremely inclined to violence at the moment, where he is concerned. Your cover story is much better than mine. The truck will keep him underwater long enough to wear away any evidence.”

“Where can we…?” Will pressed his lips together, thinking.

Hannibal suggested, “There’s that deep ravine in Walsh County, a few towns away,” he recalled. “Overlooking a deep lake. Chiyoh showed it to me one day as she thinks it a marvel of rustic, natural beauty.”

“Ranger’s Ditch? She thinks that’s a wonder of rustic charm?”

“She has many such notions. Chiyoh is nothing if not inventive in her ceaseless quest for the positive side of every sight and scenario. That particular location is hardly the first place that will spring to mind when the authorities investigate his disappearance. They won’t drag that body of water, certainly not before the fish, among other things, ensure we are absolved of blame.”

“It’s alright, it’s all gonna be alright…” Will smiled crookedly. He was so in love.

Nodding slowly, Hannibal resumed, “We can never speak of this again, Will, ever. We must take a vow of silence.”

“You’re so cute,” Will grinned, playing with his lover’s hair, gently squeezing his elegant cheek. “We can…just give this whole….*murder*….uh, a code word or phrase, alright? We’ll never say his name, even when we’re alone. We’ll call the whole incident, um…'Blueberry Egg McMuffin.'”

Hannibal was beyond baffled. “What?”

“Oh, on account of I always thought that would taste good. But McDonald’s ain’t ever had blueberry biscuits. Waste of a good recipe idea if you ask me…”

“It sounds disgusting.”

Will laughed, covering his mouth as his chest shook with it. “No, it doesn’t, it’d be delicious.”

“No,” Hannibal insisted, “The flavors would not mix well. I’m not sure what you’re thinking of, truly. But alright, from now on we shall only mention this incident using that code term.”

“You got a deal, partner,” Will smiled.

Hannibal stood up, apparently accepting that he must do so rather than remain there given the circumstances. He looked like he’d rather cling to Will’s lap all night.

Will he kissed the older man’s lips softly and said, “That’s to give you the vim and vigor to get through the cover up.”

“Oh, Will. With you by my side, there’s nothing I can’t endure, nothing I can’t accomplish.” He kissed Will in return and hugged him.

They both took warm comfort in each other’s nearness while not needing to say they were shell-shocked, punchy, and still shaking with fear.

Was it fear, Will wondered, or a crazy joy, even a sense of accomplishment? Before this night, he had never dreamed himself or Hannibal could be capable of this violence, but they had done it because they had to. Even so…Will felt now completely bonded to his lover in a way nothing could unbind, a way no one else could understand, just the two of them.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, from the present timeline, you know Will and Hannibal never did get busted for the murder. By the way…goodbye, Earl! Been waiting like a year to use that

joke.

**Next time:** we're staying in the past for at least one more chapter, where Will, liberated from Earl earlier than planned, follows his passion for Hannibal to the limit.

Soon after that, we're going back to the present, where we will get a lot of answers about what happened to split these two up back in '93, and of course, it all gets mended in a happy-ever-after. Can't wait to finally take this through to the long-planned end!

**Fic playlist:** https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1PxX7qS7Mne1uNHHnamKZi?si=cbae567ddc0c4d7e

**Find me on socials: Twitter:** @earthsickwoyou

**Tumblr:** earthsickwithoutyou (main), some-sick-deja-vu (hannigram sideblog)

# Like Strawberry Wine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Then.**
**Will.**

"*Like strawberry wine, 17*
*The hot July moon*
*Saw everything*
*My first taste of love, whoa,*
*Bittersweet*
*But green on the vine*
*Like strawberry wine*" -Deana Carter

***

Things progressed strangely after that, or maybe Will's perceptions were a bit jumbled. There was shock, liberation and first love coming at him all at once, like a chaotic cyclone sweeping him away from his former life. Who knew where he'd land?

To start with, he and Grady moved into the apartment near town square a month earlier than planned. With his eighteenth birthday a mere few weeks off, the court had placed Will's very temporary guardianship with Grady's ever-trustworthy parents, but that was only a formality. Will just didn't think he could be part of yet another family that he wasn't *really* a part of. It was time to be a grown-up instead.

Now that he had Hannibal,Will both longed for and dreaded his birthday. It meant time was taking him closer to Fall, when his lover was due back in Baltimore, in that fancy adult, sophisticated, fast-paced world Will couldn't comprehend.

But when Will was eighteen, at least he and Hannibal didn't have to be quite so worried about being seen together kissing or holding hands and stuff. It was still nothing he'd do in front of random people, but with friends, why not? By September, what else would have changed, how would they change each other? Will instinctively felt there were many more evolutions to come at this crossroads place in life where he'd ended up unexpectedly early.

Earl's death was ruled an unsolved homicide, one that Will did not yet know would never be solved, but would remain a mystery while the general populace was sure one of the other dealers stabbed him. It looked for all the world like Earl ripped someone off, and the pieces fit perfectly into place.

Will didn't have to be afraid of Earl, or life in the cramped, terrible little house, and it was too overpowering and new sometimes, added to the fresh trauma of the violent way it came about. He was still playing emotional catch-up on the fear, the adrenaline, the sick twist of triumph, the grief, not for Earl, that was a relief – but the grief for his own moral innocence.

“Your own moral innocence, in this case, would not have done you any favors,” Hannibal told him one late night when they were down by the river having a picnic.

It was midnight, so the place was abandoned other than them and the katydids. Grady, with his usual “I-sleep-like-the-dead” condition, never noticed Will sneaking out. He always made some bland, vague remark about it when Will crept back in on the mornings after his “secret” dates with the older man – obviously Grady knew where Will was going, or at least with whom. But he made no remarks beyond “woohoo, walk of shame,” or “either you and Hannibal have been neckin’, or Count Dracula jumped you down by Old River Road. I heard he lurks there at night, seeking the fresh blood of dorks who finally land their crush.”

“Mmhm, that so, meathead?” Will had snorted that morning, tossing his shirt from the night before at Grady after whipping it off.

“Hey, no, anything but that, *Jesus,* Graham.” Grady wrinkled his nose and threw the shirt back at his friend, who caught it with a laugh.

Will smirked, “Since the *local vampires* have such a taste for idiots who finally got to smooch their crush, I guess you’d better wear a cross, carry garlic and stock up on turtlenecks despite this heat. Cut the sleeves off maybe. ‘Cause you know we *all* heard about you and Pauline.”

Grady did an incredibly unconvincing “I have no idea what you are talking about” face. “*Me?* And – Pauline? Pssh. No such pairing, no kissing is occurring, no sir, we are just disinterested occasional acquaintances…”

He lay back on their patched-up used futon which had turned out to be in significantly worse condition than advertised and tossed a Nerf football up and down.

“Everyone knows her parents don’t let her date,” Will pointed out. “Until she’s of age and goes to college. So you and her are datin’ on the sly. Maybe we ain’t so different after all, Romeo.”

“What cat dragged you in, Will Graham?” Charlie laughed, inviting herself into the apartment since the door was unlocked. “Let me guess, a Lithuanian one.”

“Who told?” Will groaned.

Grady rolled his eyes as he caught the football again, then sat up with an accusing smile. “I might ask you the same, but you ain’t subtle. You waxed poetical and made eye sex with that young doctor supermodel enough times that we knew who was the only one possibly givin’ you love bites. But how did y’all know about me and Pauline? That's right, Charlie, Will has told me that y’all know.”

“I don’t give a fuck if he told you,” Charlie giggled and flopped down on their couch with a Crystal Pepsi she’d grabbed from the fridge.

It was small, but a cute little place with more open, clean spaces and windows to let sunshine in than Will’s previous house. He was proud of the apartment and his job at the local

mechanic's garage, plus down the docks fixing boats. Making his own rent, dating a grown-ass man. Sometimes he impressed himself.

"I know all, and you oughta know that by now," Charlie elaborated grandly. "You look at that Pauline like she's some red-haired, nerdy angel."

"Because she is," Grady claimed, sitting beside Charlie and staring at the tv. *Saved by the Bell* was on, but he was doubtless seeing Pauline's face instead.

"Is that how you see your amazingly glamorous and distantly serene Chiyoh, pray-tell?" he teased as Charlie groaned.

"I see her as the perfect woman who I will woo in my own time and in my own way. The moment will come – might be tomorrow, might be five years, but I'll know it's right and I will make her mine."

It was the only thing Charlie ever got dreamy-eyed about, well except for "T-Boz's abs." As such, her uncharacteristically wistful expression weirded Will out, though he was rooting for Charlie's success with Hannibal's surrogate sister.

The day was pleasant and fun enough, hanging with his two best friends and then working back to back shifts between the garage and the boats. He was only waiting, though. The day was the hours he had to get through to see Hannibal, which was where all his love, energy, ambition and obsession were permanently centered.

"Maybe my moral fiber stopped being nutritious for my well-being," he laughed and put his head on his love's shoulder down by the river at midnight.

The late July moon shone its light down on them in peaceful beams of silver-blue, as if it was encouraging their affair. Certainly, that blissfully ethereal moon was the best witness to their love that Will could have chosen.

Nature fit with him and Hannibal, because their bond was just that, natural and impossible to fight. Anything organized, complicated, strict and full of rules was universes away when they were together. That stuff was everything they were running from, hand in hand. This sublime hideaway tucked between trees and the tranquil river was their own little world.

"I don't expect to make a habit out of you know…" Will mimed stabbing, as if the *owls*, who were the only other ones around, would fly down to the police station to report him.

Hannibal nodded solemnly. "Nor do I. But the incident did prove to me that under the right circumstances, violence is the only solution, but also simply best, what one must do. And that in that context, it can be glorious. Empowering."

"A rush," Will added, nodding slowly. "Yeah, I guess. Alright, I know. But we may have to take up aerobics or synchronized swimmin' if we are lookin' for thrills. Cause we damn sure can't go killin' everyone who bothers us."

“Sadly true. I would enjoy that. But luckily, I have other pastimes that provide physical fitness and excitement, all at once.”

He tumbled Will over on the plaid blanket, both of them laughing. As he hovered above the boy, tracing his cheeks, his brow and nose, a fond habit, Will smirked. “Oh, really? Do tell? Should I be jealous?”

“Let me show you how much.” Hannibal gathered Will against him in a strong embrace and took his mouth in kiss after searing kiss.

Fingers tangling in each other’s hair as nails scraped backs under their shirts, they felt something else change. For all the nights they’d snuck down there to have a meal, go swimming and make out, sometimes foreplay (Will was still shy and learning, still desperate to please; Hannibal was still tentative and gentle, until the arousal built to the point that he wasn’t – Will’s favorite part, his favorite anything).

But tonight was different, it was too charged for those calmer forms of affection; they were on fire together. Maybe enough time had passed since the Earl thing that their feelings were free to land completely on each other, the shock having ebbed back somewhat with days, nights, and acceptance.

Everything felt wild and free, and they rolled around writhing and kissing each other hard and deep, tongues lashing. Impatient biting, sucking and the whipping off of annoying clothes, and then the two of them staring into each other’s eyes, finding they’d rolled onto the soft grass in the madness of their passionate fit. The gluttony of kisses and gropes had left them breathing hard, a little surprised that they’d gone so far, knowing there was no turning back.

The second he realized that he actually was totally naked, that Hannibal had snarled “Will,” biting his neck and shoving away his shorts and boxers, having already tossed Will’s t-shirt to some unknown location, he turned beet red and averted his eyes. “Aww, dammit. I’m all. Naked and stuff.”

He closed his eyes. He peeked at Hannibal a little.

*Daammnn.*

He closed his eyes again. Hannibal had a perfect body, as if he had walked off a glossy romance novel cover and Will looked like, what, a gangly stringbean? Aside from his arm muscle definition and curvy thighs, he wasn’t sure what he had to offer, but then, he’d always been confused as to why Hannibal was so attracted, while desperately eager to keep it that way.

He fussed, “I’m too *naked,* what if I look bad or just awkward and what if I don’t do… whatever we get into tonight, right or the way you like it?”

Hannibal kissed his closed eyes, stroking his riotous curls back from his sweaty brow. “Will. You’re the most gorgeous creature in the world. Every inch of you is sensuous and makes me

go insane." He clutched Will's thigh and put his face on the boy's chest, breathing hotly, illustrating his point. "*Insane.*"

"I'd do anything to have you, I want you," Hannibal said more breathlessly, and cursed in his native tongue, hoarse and blinded by lustful obsession. "I love you more than life itself. My Will…"

Will lost the thread of his insecure thoughts because Hannibal left no room for them, taking over his perceptions with the scent of mysterious, sexy cologne, his light stubble all over Will's bare, sensitive skin, leaving pink marks, the smell of the wildflowers and soil, their sweat and desire mixing together. He felt no shame, but he could feel the hard, bumpy ground under him and the lapping of the river flow, Hannibal's low, groaning worship of him as his hands did the same, a translation Will would never forget.

He felt Hannibal's voice under his skin more surely than the movement of his own blood or the breath in his lungs, all of that belonging to Hannibal alone, now.

"My perfect boy," Hannibal murmured, dazed but deliberately focused at the same time.

His eyes and expression were dreamy, but fire consumed them both as he knew, or else quickly learned, every remaining place to touch Will in various ways from rough to soft or both that made his lover moan and cling to him, begging for more.

"Were you thinkin' you'd get lucky?" Will asked with kiss-swollen, cherry-red lips, panting when Hannibal paused to tug his leather messenger bag towards their naked bodies, pressed together except for the temporary absence of his beloved hands.

He had a feeling he knew what Hannibal suddenly wanted other than besieging him with more love and pleasure than he could ever deserve or comprehend. Sure enough, a grinning, dark-eyed Hannibal drew out a squeezable container of lube that made Will go from bright red to whatever the hell was past that; his lustful frenzy momentarily eclipsed by his repressed upbringing and all that hellfire preaching he heard in town.

"I decided to purchase some and keep it with me, in the theory that eventually, we might require it." Hannibal smiled down at him, breathing hard, staring at Will's eyes and face. "I would also very much like to make love to you on the blanket. Not in the dirt."

They both laughed. "We have to try and roll less, then," Will shrugged, not that expectant that they'd be able to achieve the goal.

"I want this to be as perfect as it can be for you, Will, but at the same time…I wish we were someplace…with a lovely, big bed…"

"Hannibal, it's gorgeous down here, and better yet, this is our place. Ain't no more suitable place for this to happen the first time but here, like…I think it's meant to be here. We're really making our place and this summer ours. There's also, well…two other things," he said as Hannibal smiled in relief and carefully moved his lover back to the blanket.

He looked damn cute, kneeling on the ground and trying to smooth the blanket out again, getting rid of the wrinkles with typical perfectionism, always wanting things to be better than Will even needed.

“I’m listening, darling,” Hannibal said, naked and stunning, also ridiculous-looking doing all that organizing and carefully placing the lube, bottled water, and then their clothes in various places, the clothes now folded.

He was nervous, too. It defied Will’s belief, since clearly he would have let Hannibal have him anywhere without ever complaining or even thinking about the things his lover was briefly distracted by.

“‘Kay, well then, don’t worry about making it all neat when you know we’re only gonna do all the messiest things two people can do, and hey, don’t ever forget you gave me the moon and the stars, or that this is the best night of my life.”

Hannibal stayed above him again, cupping his face, stroking his pale, smooth skin, a haunted look in his eyes, the despair of thinking he could never do right by Will and yet couldn’t resist him.

“I think they must have named this town after you,” he said, gazing at the lithe, trembling boy laid out for him on the blanket.

Will felt soft, supple and needy, blossoming uncontrollably. With a thrill of terror he understood that his own words had been true: this was the best night of his life and he might very well never be this happy again.

He knew they loved each other, but they came from different worlds, which meant there was relatively little chance they would get to keep this, or each other, once reality came barging back in. Eventually, they would wake from this dream and – well, he didn’t want to, and he didn’t have to yet, and he wasn’t going to think of it. Right now, it didn’t matter.

So rather than making any serious statements or expressing his fears, Will just laughed and said “This town’s been called Angel Wood since long before I was born.”

“Which doesn’t make you any less of an angel.”

The hot, oppressive air seemed to throb around them as their bodies joined. Hannibal opened Will slowly, with such love and careful tenderness, which was the same way he fucked at first, too. But finally, when Will adjusted to being so full and begged him to move, then to go “*harder, faster, please,*” Hannibal set himself free from some of his worried, perhaps overly considerate hesitation. Will could see it in the tenseness of his body and his gasping breaths, how painful it was not to let go and just take Will as deeply as he could.

If Hannibal had relaxed and started thrusting more deliberately with the boy’s urging, as both of them moaned, sweating and kissing, groping every inch of each other they could reach – when Will called him “Daddy” in a blur of shocking pleasure, Hannibal briefly lost his mind. He fucked Will so hard after that that Will came between them in a gush of sudden, sharp ecstasy, shivering and crying out, “don’t stop, don’t stop, please.”

All the while, Will was thinking he could make this last, he could make their love fit forever into one short, hot summer. He wanted to make each hour they spent together feel like years of happiness they might never get to have. Tumultuous waves of joy and confused anguish took him over as Hannibal made Will his own. Like the summer, it was sweet, raw and unforgettable, lightning in a bottle. Slow, torrid and hard love spread over the next few months, shamelessly stolen from and crammed into every second they could get their hands and mouths on each other.

Because they'd never forget a single moment of it, the way it was easy to let other memories fade or slip away into the ether of time, this night and their summer did – in a sense – truly last forever. But like the gushing, sharp and swooning fever of first love, their time was also over too quickly, faster than either could ever understand.

Chapter End Notes

This was a shorter chapter, so I'm going to add the final one today as well. 🥰

# Permanent Detour

Chapter Notes

**cw:** brief mention of self-harm

**Note:** the explanation of Hannigram's lapse in communication and Will thinking Hannibal abandoned him only makes sense if you use "Romcom logic," remember it was the early to mid-'90s (no texting and very antiquated internet), and that both of them were extremely insecure. 🥺

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Now. Hannibal.**

Christmas Eve morning began inauspiciously in one sense, which was that Hannibal awoke to the jarring sound of especially over-jolly holiday music. What followed directly after was not much more promising.

Rhett, downstairs in his room, shouted “Savannah Jean you turn down that goddamn annoyin’ Christmas music or I’ll come over there and throw your speakers out the window!”

Hannibal opened his eyes, becoming slowly aware that the state of his body was not a dream, as it so often had been over the last two decades. A very real, warm and soft, sleepy Will Graham lay on his chest, gradually waking up and resting his chin gently on Hannibal. His eyes were stunning in the lazy morning light, two shimmering sapphires, and all of Hannibal’s universe held inside. This was all Hannibal cared to know and everything he needed.

Therefore, he decided that despite the yelling and terrible music, this was the best Christmas Eve he had possibly ever had – his first with Will, bizarre as that was, and he hoped the beginning of a new future together.

“Hey!” Will said, raising his voice to shout to Rhett downstairs. “Language, mister.”

S.J. yelled, “Rhett, you just try to come and take my fuckin’ speakers away from me on goddamn Christmas Eve, like the fun-hatin’ little twerp you are, so’s I don’t even believe we are truly related–”

“Young lady!” Will shouted, lifting his head fully off Hannibal for a moment. “Language!”

“Oh, my God, like we’re two years old!” Savannah Jean griped.

“Shut up, Will, Jesus,” Rhett complained. “We’re not little kids.”

“Yes, Jesus,” Will called, “Tomorrow’s his birthday, you really wanna throw around his name like that?”

He caught Hannibal’s eye and they both burst out laughing at Will’s amused, purposefully over-the-top scolding.

“You’re such a nerd, Dad,” Savannah Jean groaned.

Her brother added, “Stop, Will, just don’t say words, for f–”

“Rhett! What’re you doin’? Goin’ for another f-bomb?” Will smothered his own laughter in his hand as Hannibal turned over and buried his face in the pillow to silence his own. “What is Santa gonna have to say about that?”

“You’re the worst!” Rhett complained. “I’m goin’ back to sleep, and when I wake up none of y’all better be spoutin’ all this little kid-Christmas bullsh–”

“I’m surprised at you,” Will yelled, lying transparently. “But have a nice sleep.”

“Ughh,” Savannah Jean said, the cringe audible even from upstairs in the small house. “Dad, happiness and Christmas have combined to make you dorkier than ever.”

As if to acknowledge the twins’ agreement on this subject, at least, S.J. waved the white flag by lowering the volume on her speakers.

Will grinned and mounted Hannibal from behind. The older man turned his face and saw Will blanketing his body in a strong embrace, kissing his neck, ruffling his hair.

“You’re purring, darling,” Hannibal smiled.

“Hmm.” Will flipped over onto his back and grabbed his lover, pulling Hannibal down on top of him. “Can’t help it, God you feel good.”

They kissed, languorously, enjoying every single moment. Hannibal felt as if he was savoring Will’s kiss with the vision of thousands more in their future, but he could practically taste Will’s own line of thinking.

He could tell from a certain tension in his boy’s body that Will was kissing to savor, in case they were soon to separate again and this was one of their last encounters. His heart couldn’t stand to let Will keep believing any such thing, and although he knew that Will would be displeased at him for bringing “it” up, he felt he had to.

“Will, you do understand, I’m not going anywhere. You believe it now, right?” Hannibal paused the kiss and cradled Will’s gorgeous face, absorbing the perplexed, annoyed resistance and finding that – as usual – his beloved was a special kind of sexy when irritable.

“When you make that face at me, as if I’ve just crammed half a lemon in your mouth, it only causes my adoration to grow tenfold,” Hannibal said with a sly grin. He kissed Will again, and again. “My perfect boy.”

Will groaned, arms around Hannibal caressing his back and shoulders despite the confused gloom in his eyes whenever this subject came up.

“Did we not have an agreement? C’mon. You know. I don’t ask you to stay, you don’t ask me to leave, we disappear into this and ignore reality until after the holidays. Could I *be* more clear?” Will raised his eyebrows.

“You couldn’t be more adorable, mylimasis.” Hannibal nuzzled their noses together, sinking a hand into soft brunette curls to tangle his fingers. “When we are together, every part of me is happy, from my head to my toes. You fill me with light enough to know I’ve been in the dark for the better part of twenty years without you. So, can you be more clear on why you refuse to believe me when I say that I want to–”

“Stay here,” Will scoffed, leaning into and accepting every touch and kiss, despite his grumpy words and expression. His body responded to Hannibal the same as always, like a flower opening up to the sun. “Here, in Angel Wood, Louisi-fucking-ana, you expect me to buy that? I mean. Look.”

He sat up, regarding his lover with a reluctant smile of pure affection. Hannibal had a puppyish look, with his hair mussed and his naked body framed in Will’s blue sheets.

“You have a life in Baltimore, and there’s a reason it pulled us apart once. Now, you’ve built a career, a distinguished existence with no room for anything from this world. You might as well be on Mars right now.”

“Heaven would be my chosen metaphor.”

“*Hannibal.* What would you do here? Don’t answer that, just think on it if you must, but don’t talk about serious shit when this is our one chance–”

“No it isn’t, please stop saying that, love.” Hannibal sighed. “I’d have to be dragged away from you by wild animals, and even then, I believe I would crawl my way back, bleeding and bruised. I could do many things here; I’ve thought about opening a medical practice in town. Ultimately, it’s not my main concern. Don’t you think it’s more than coincidence that brought us back together? We can’t ignore destiny…”

“Destiny, for cryin’ out loud, Pauline’s got you watchin’ those Hallmark movies, doesn’t she?” Will rolled his eyes.

“Perhaps you should watch one sometime,” Hannibal countered sagely. “Cynicism is overrated, at least when it comes to us and this.”

“It ain’t magic that brought you back to Angel Wood, Mr. Destiny.”

“*Dr.* Destiny to you.” Hannibal smirked and lifted his brows teasingly.

Will tossed a throw pillow at him.

“You’re here because your uncle got sick, on paper anyway, we know better.” Will gave him an incisive look that went through Hannibal like an x-ray to his soul.

“Do we?”

“Why’d you drive here instead of taking a plane? No one does that, certainly no one with your kinda money.” Will nudged Hannibal’s thigh with his knee.

Hannibal nudged right back. “I was giving myself time to change my mind.”

“Uh huh. Time to decide if your uncle deserved reconciliation with you on his almighty, royal deathbed, or time to decide if you had the balls to see me again and check on how you felt, get a little closure?”

Hannibal threw the small pillow at Will, but the younger man caught it midair.

“You hate your uncle, he’s the most evil person in the world, why would you ever drag your fancy ass down here at Christmas to sweat in the red dirt amongst ruffians in denim cut-offs? You could be partying it up at a ritzy hotel with supermodels right now. Somethin’ more pressing, maybe a little midlife crisis?”

“I felt a familial obligation. And the thought of seeing you again…it is embarrassing,” Hannibal acknowledged with a wince. “But it terrified me. My plan was to go directly to the Chateau and avoid you at all costs.”

“Why, terrified?” Will bit his lip, a little surprised by this.

“I hadn’t heard from you in many years, we broke each other’s hearts and the last time we saw one another at the New Years’ party, we did not part on good terms.”

“‘Good terms,’ oh brother.” Will threw a hand up in scorn. “You show up at that shindig with Alana Bloom on your arm, and she’s wearin’ a diamond big enough to sink the damn Titanic on her hand…”

“I was where I was obligated to be, as usual. Marriage to Alana would have been the same, a pathetic attempt to domesticate myself.” Hannibal shrugged. “You will observe that unlike you, I never married.” He held up his “pure” hand which had never worn a traitorous ring, unlike Will’s.

“For fuck’s – I can’t believe you ever felt a moment of jealousy over Frederick Chilton.”

“You walked into that gala on New Year’s Eve, in my world out of nowhere…” Hannibal almost wanted to point at Will at the mere memory. The feeling of seeing Will had been tormenting beyond words.

“I was engaged to a psychiatrist, we ended up at the same obnoxious rich-people gala thing on New Years between our two states and – it was a medical fundraiser, all kinds of doctors were there. I had no way of knowin’ you would be. And with *her*.”

Hannibal’s jaw dropped. “You were with *him!*” He never yelled, but his tone raised slightly from his usual one. Such a rare occurrence, to Will it must feel like the sound shook the walls.

“Shh,” Will insisted, “Don’t let the twins hear us bickerin’ like an old married couple.”

They both gave each other soft smiles at the phrase.

“*You were with him,*” Hannibal amended in a whisper.

“That’s different.” Will nodded at his own words as if nothing could be truer.

“How so?” Hannibal had half a mind to give him a spanking at this point.

“If you can’t recognize that Frederick was a failed attempt to find another you, then you’re blind. He was like you in so many ways, except for the whole…asshole thing he had goin’ on. And…not being as smart, talented or classy. Still, he had the sophisticated demeanor, the style, the age difference around the same, the authoritative air and way with me, a sense of competence I craved, he was a doctor, does this not add up?”

“It adds up to my desire to wring his neck,” Hannibal growled. “Please never imply one single detail of your sex life with Chilton. I cannot promise I will hear it sanely.”

“Hannibal, that’s beside the point. Though how you got some tawdry impression based on ‘competence’ and ‘authority,’ I don’t –”

“Don’t play the innocent when you’re deliberately taunting me,” Hannibal retorted, “Did you call him ‘Daddy’ as well?”

Will gave him the Will Graham Scowl to end them all, grabbed the full sized pillow and thwacked his lover, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to emphasize his frustration.

“Of course not, you idiot, I never called anyone else that and I never will.”

“Why are we talking about that dreadful party?” Hannibal relaxed slightly. “I don’t even remember.”

“Who knows? Guess you wanted to make sense of things.”

“I don’t care about the past, we’re here now,” Hannibal corrected him. “But whatever is holding you back from me seems to originate from somewhere in our shared history. If I could root out the cause and show you I never stopped loving you, perhaps you will find it easier to trust me.”

“But it’s not about trust,” Will sighed, tipping his head so it rested on Hannibal’s broad shoulder.

Hannibal wrapped an arm around Will’s precious form and wished he could hold on so tight there would be no parting them ever again. “What then?

“Trust is…fine. This is about the fact of reality, versus this little vacation from it we’re in now, for a while. Stolen time.” Will kissed Hannibal’s shoulder. “That’s all destiny had to spare for us, so let’s make the most of it.”

“Whatever it is that you think I did, that’s made your friends suspect me of being the devil incarnate…it isn’t about New Year’s. Am I right?”

“I guess it makes sense you’d want to dissect it all, bein’ a surgeon. Fine, have it your way. No, it ain’t about New Years. It was already too late by then. All we did was hate-eye-fuck each other on a confetti strewn dancefloor, all you did was kiss her and that made me kiss him and we had some dumb argument before you left with her…nothing resolved, and if I’m honest, no real meaning.”

“It was a night of…intense feelings,” Hannibal nodded slowly. “I remember wondering why you were so infuriated with me, saying I abandoned you when that was never the case, that I ignored you to become engaged to ‘a perfect girl who’s all you could never be’. That was completely untrue.”

“I remember you thrown’ it back in my face then, too, and how you asked me how dare I show up accusin’ you of all these lies after making you watch me dance with Frederick and kiss him. I said, ‘you hypocrite, you’re engaged, too!’”

“That’s when I noticed – you said ‘too,’ and I saw the ring on your finger. I believed I would die, realizing you were to marry him.” Hannibal wished he didn’t remember the night so vividly. “I felt sick when I saw that. And you, believing I stopped loving you and moved on – absurd –”

“It was just a mess of nonsense. Our fiances showed up on either side of us all, ‘Will, darling?’ and ‘Hannibal, is everything okay?’ I hissed, ‘we were just leaving, weren’t we, Frederick?’ and stormed out.”

Hannibal sighed. “And standing there in a convention center with terrible dance music pulsing in the air and a fiance I barely remembered, that was the last time I’d see you for so many more years of wasteland living. Will, I broke off the engagement to Alana later that night.”

Will looked mildly surprised, indicating he assumed Hannibal and Alana had still been together for a while after that. “But you never reached out to me.”

“How could I? You were so angry, I…I was a coward, I was afraid of how much you could hurt me. Your incomparable power over me.”

Will rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I almost broke up with Frederick, too. Only stubborn pride and denial made me go through with it. It was a nightmare.”

“Shh, we’re here now, really here.” Hannibal hugged him, barely able to stop himself begging, let me stay.

“I know that, but…you must know why I was mad, why my friends thought you abandoned me, too, I mean they were there. When I was eighteen and so in love with you that my whole existence seemed to depend on seein’ you and bein’ with you, and I just never did? They were the ones to see how badly I fell apart. It was dark, Hannibal, it was awful. Worst time of my whole life, and I can’t go back there. That is why I’m being sensible this time, realistic. I

need to remember that this is temporary, so I don't get shocked again and lose my mind. I got kids now, they need me in one piece."

"For the last time, will you please tell me in what way I abandoned you?" Hannibal could not be more bewildered or upset, even without knowing if he was angry or sad or frustrated. Probably a potent, heavy mix of all three. "I left because you insisted I return to begin my residency in Baltimore alone."

Will pressed his lips together. After a few beats, he revealed, "Right, because back then, towards the end of our summer, your mentor called and I answered the phone, one of the few times I was ever at the damn Chateau. I ended up chattin' with him for a little while and without knowin' we were a couple, he said it would be career suicide and a waste of all your incredibly hard work in med school if you were in a serious relationship when you began your new job. That you'd be married to the job, and anyone who would bog you down with another commitment would be selfish. 'Unforgivably selfish,' I think he said."

"Good lord," Hannibal glowered. "Why did you listen to him? I could never understand why you pushed me to leave alone when you clearly still wanted to come with me. I knew you still loved me."

"I listened because I grew up believin' I was trash, and you, the epitome of all classy decency, a real man actually goin' somewhere other than a cheap, greasy car garage? I never thought I was good enough for you. Just fooled myself all summer with fake confidence to hide how I really felt, which was so goddamn scared. I always knew I'd lose you. It felt like I was only gonna hold you back and you'd eventually resent or even hate me for it. I wanted you to have a good life, a free life."

"I understand. We were both young, you were barely out of high school, I wasn't much more mature. We made bad choices. I left because I thought you realized I was wrong for you, and the idea of my career being the priority was some…concocted reason to make me feel better, let me down easy."

"Naw, that's ridiculous," Will shook his head. "Dammit. We never really talked about it. Just…smoke and mirrors."

"When I left, we did promise to write one another," Hannibal reminded him. "You said phone calls would be too much…"

"Cause I figured we might get so attached that you'd end up makin' a mistake at work, or else throwin' your future away to run back down here to me…letters were okay. They were less direct, but I could pour my heart out instead of bottling it up. At first, I thought you deserved to know how much I still loved you, so I wrote pages and pages about it. Finished with a reminder that we needed to wait a couple years to let you get settled as a surgeon and then could we try again? And you know that you did not reply to that letter, Hannibal." Will trembled as tears filled his eyes. "So there, can we stop talking about it now?"

"What letter?" Hannibal asked, "I have no idea–"

“I had your address. I had your damn number. I even double-checked with Chiyoh, they were right, you were there, just ignorin’ my letters. So I’d call, but you were always gone. Some roommate tellin’ me you just stepped out, loud music playin, parties constantly. So I knew you weren’t working that hard, you were just movin’ on happily and living it up, too busy to let me know you didn’t want me anymore.”

“Will.” Hannibal hugged Will closer to his chest and stroked his hair rhythmically, kissing the top of his head. “I need you so much. Can’t you feel it? That’s never changed. I never got a letter, I never got a message that you’d called. I thought you were the one who…”

“If that’s true, you were bein’ stupid and insecure, but I don’t know if I can believe you. My common sense is tellin’ me you’re honest, from what I know of you now. But my heart won’t let go of the hurt. Of thinkin’ you ignored me. I sent a lot of letters, none came back return to sender, none got an answer. What was I supposed to think? You should have done something, Hannibal.”

“Yes, I should have, but the ‘something’ would have been to drop my admitted insecurity and go to you to confess my love and insist we never part. It could not have been replying to letters I never received. If I had received a single one I would have been on the next flight here. Write back? I would have come back.”

“Okay, okay.” Will rubbed his tear-stained face against Hannibal’s skin, his hands tightening on his lover’s low back. “I think I need time to think about it. I don’t know how to believe you. Can you understand that?”

“I am willing to give you as much time as you need, whether or not I understand. I’m admittedly so perplexed and upset that I don’t know what else to do. I defer to what you need, above all else, darling.”

“One more thing, before we drop this and don’t talk about it again until… January second or something.”

“Alright.” Hannibal looked down at him with a tearful smile of his own. “Anything.”

“Well, I try to rationalize bein’ or not bein’ together by what makes sense. And to anyone outside this relationship, it doesn’t seem like a healthy dynamic. Because you’re rich and I’m poor, for one thing.”

“Will, are you trying to say we should not be together because other people might think you are using me for my money?” Hannibal was offended. “Don’t worry. I think they can look at me and realize I have much more to offer than financial security.”

“Oh, my lord…You conceited…I mean, you’re right. You are that hot. But the financial thing…it’s an uneven power dynamic, but that’s kinda us, huh?” Will chewed his lip again.

“I don’t know that ‘that’s us.’ You always had more power over me than you could understand or accept.”

“In one way, I know that,” Will agreed. “Because you think that I can give you emotional security, like you could give me financial security.”

“What do you mean?”

Will smiled sadly and said, “Lay down for a minute.”

He waited for Hannibal to do so, then tugged the sheets down a little to reveal the scars on the older man’s upper thighs.

“Some of these aren’t that old,” he said, brow furrowed, more tears filling his eyes as he gently traced the small, deep lines. The cuts stood out, light or dark, soft or harder ridges on Hannibal’s otherwise smooth skin.

“No.” Hannibal closed his eyes. “They aren’t.”

“You done it since we’ve been back together?”

“You know I haven’t.”

Will kissed his face softly, his cheeks, his forehead, his lips. “Hannibal,” he whispered as their tears mixed, “How many times was it about me? Us not bein’ together and you thinkin’ you didn’t deserve me ‘cause your uncle raised you to think that way automatically?”

“Most times. But please, don’t blame yourself, Will. I simply love you far too much and always have. This was…a way to stay calm and continue living. It was not a cry for help, nor an attempt to end my life, quite the opposite. I feared collapsing into a nightmare state forever if I didn’t wake myself up often enough.” He swallowed hard.

Will moved down on the bed, then pressed a soft kiss to each scar. “Don’t do it again, please don’t. Even if you go home after the holidays. You need to wake up, you call me, I’ll be here. We don’t have to be those idiot kids who don’t communicate, not anymore.”

“We have been talking it out for a while this morning, which seems like progress, even if the topic is now to be shelved for a while.” Hannibal moaned at the incredible, cathartic pang of Will’s lips on his sensitive collection of scars. For Will to open his chest and kiss his beating heart could not have felt more vulnerable.

“Yeah. Don’t you think it’s best we give ourselves time to think and breathe before talkin’ about it again? Plus, I need a break, Hannibal. I can’t spend too much time on this. It still hurts too much to go back there.”

“So come back here, to me.”

“Mmm.” Will kissed his thighs again, then his hip, his stomach, his chest, the pressure of his warm lips becoming slowly wetter, more lingering and passionate. “Here’s the only place I wanna be. This is my Christmas present.”

“Oh?” Hannibal teased, shivering in pleasure at Will’s kisses and the erotic caresses that followed. “Even though you only keep me around for my vast riches?”

“I don’t only keep you around for that, Daddy.” Will grinned wickedly, then climbed astride his lover, straddling Hannibal and sinking eager fingers into his soft chest hair. “You have other qualities. A few of them, actually.”

“I’m sorry.” Hannibal’s eyes twinkled as he smirked. His heart raced for Will, on a never-ending crash course into love that just repeated on a loop, which was fine with him. “But I don’t know what you mean. Can you demonstrate?”

“Yes, I think I can, but it might take a while.” Will feigned a worried look at this, but couldn’t hold back a giggle, only to be grabbed and rolled over, right before Hannibal spent the better part of late morning consuming him in the sheets with another round of relentless love-making.

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“Did you visit Robertus, even, since you been back?” Will blew on his coffee as he and Hannibal enjoyed the brunch which the accomplished chef had made for the family.

They sat down to eat in the kitchen, while the twins had taken their plates of food to watch a movie in the living room. Since they did say ‘thank you,’ Will seemed to be fine with this decision and happy to see the twins getting along again.

“I have seen my uncle.” Hannibal frowned. “He hasn’t changed. The same old insults and coded threats, the same hatred for me, without foundation or end. I hardly think I’m someone he wants to see again, if this truly is his last Christmas.”

“What are his doctors sayin’?” Will cut up some sausage, pausing in concern to hear Hannibal’s answer.

“Chiyoh and Murasaki have given me to understand the prognosis has become more severe since my visit. He’s bed-ridden, and the doctors are by now in the mode of ‘making him comfortable.’ We know where that leads.”

“To the end,” said Will grimly. “Look, whatever happens, Hannibal, you couldn’t have done better by that miserable old despot. You always tried to give him respect and extra chances, and he treated you terribly. You don’t owe him a thing, and you ain’t got a thing to guilt yourself over once he’s gone.”

“I know that,” Hannibal nodded, holding Will’s hand in the middle of the table. He stroked the younger man’s lovely fingers and thought about putting his own ring on that hand someday.

“Good,” Will smiled, his eyes warm. “Now, eat your breakfast.”

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**Now. Charlie.**

Charlie really didn’t care for Robertus Lecter, truth be told. The weird old meanie was for some reason fond of Charlie, but she had no call to feel affection for him.

She knew perfectly well that he had controlled his family with a ruthless, damaging grip for decades. The stories Chiyoh told in hushed tones were chilling accounts of emotional and physical abuse. He had never hurt Chiyoh physically, but he had manipulated her away from most major decisions she tried to make on her own in adulthood. To Hannibal, he had been unforgivably cruel, and if Charlie could see that when she hated Hannibal then she really confirmed that Robertus was an awful excuse for a human being.

Now, she wasn't about to go spouting off her disapproval, certainly not now when Robertus was withering on his deathbed in a suitably dark, melodramatic room with the expected Baroque design scheme. He was, by extension, family, and Charlie considered her role to be one of constant support and loyalty to her girlfriend. She had always been polite to Robertus. It was easier being nice to Murasaki, who – while her passivity and voluntary blindness to certain habitual misdeeds often enabled her husband's bad behavior – was a lovely person and meant no harm.

Chiyoh had theorized, with disapproval, that Robertus appeared to be extra nice to Charlie in order to show how much better Chiyoh was doing in life, supposedly, than his "weak and single" nephew. "It is just another way to put Hannibal down," she had murmured. "Stay clear of him, Charlie, whenever possible. That's what I do. I'm only here for Murasaki, as it's going to be a hard time."

Yes, once the grieving period had passed, Charlie and Chiyoh were going to find a new place of their own. It was hard for Charlie not to look forward, in some inappropriately morbid way, to that brighter future. After all, she didn't really like living in some twisted Lithuanian version of a bad old *Dallas* rerun, and that's just what life at the Chateau resembled.

On Christmas Eve, her patience with Robertus waned again as she was accosted by the only one in the house who was almost as unpleasant as its lord and master. Namely, a pudgy chihuahua by the overly formal but appropriate name of Polonius. Like the vapid and bossy character in Shakespeare, Polonius the dog had a habit of barking loudly whenever it was least appropriate, losing his whisper-thin temper at the slightest perceived provocation, and generally treating the house as his own personal stomping grounds in a war only he could comprehend. In this ongoing battle, Polonius had singled Charlie out as a new enemy.

"You know what, you porky little monster?" Charlie reached down when Polonius tried to nip at her heels while she relaxed with coffee and social media on the couch.

"I'm tryin' to sit here drinkin' my damn coffee in my Christmas p.j.'s and I do not need drama from you." She sighed, wondering if the rotten little beast was just bitter from lack of attention or love.

Robertus must not have been a nice owner to the dog, even when he was in good enough health to bother acknowledging him. And Murasaki despised the creature, having told Charlie that Robertus had deliberately adopted the most unpleasant and badly behaved dog he could find (of a worthy breed, of course) to spite her after a rare argument wherein she dared to defy him.

"You wanna sit with me? Okay, maybe not, but if you want the couch, that's your only choice. C'mere, you evil butterball." She patted the cushion beside her. "What do you really

have to lose at this point?"

Polonius yipped in an aggravated manner, but with great condescension hopped up onto the couch, requiring Charlie to rescue him when "hop" was more like "lumber and fail to stick the landing."

"Poor bastard. If I pet between your ears where every dog likes bein' pet, are you gonna bite me?" Charlie raised her eyebrows and wriggled her fingers.

Polonius settled on the opposite cushion, still not far away on the small couch. He raised no objection, so she tried it out.

"Chiyoh had to run a few errands, Murasaki's napping – well-deserved – the doctors aren't around, and I'm left babysittin' your dad. Humph. Things I do for love." Charlie sighed, scratching an apparent itch behind Polonius' ear.

The dog glared at her but moved a little closer.

"I'm bored, got no one else to talk to at the moment, so put up with it if you want me to keep bein' this nice to you," Charlie warned. "Now, see, it's a little nerve-wrackin' living in a house where someone's gonna die soon. Making me nervous, like your old friend Hamlet. Much as I'm real tired of this situation, I hope nothin' goes wrong on my watch. I know nothin' about medicine or nursin' a sick…real world version of an evil Disney king."

Polonius gave her a long, judgmental look, followed by another distrustful glare as he deliberated. Then he rolled onto his back with his tiny, silly little arms and legs sticking up.

She laughed and scratched his belly. "You old softie, you ain't foolin' me. Know what you remind me of, or who? No? Well, you kinda remind me of your…step-cousin, I guess? Hannibal. I have been unceasingly mean to him for a while and now, seein' you roll over with just a little bit of lukewarm affection, I can't imagine how…like fucking harrowin' it must have been, bein' raised by Robertus. You're just his dog, and I can see he fucked you up in the head. Were you even that fucked up when he adopted you?"

Polonius crooked his head to meet her inquisitive gaze.

"Only a little, huh? Yup, that's what I thought! Maybe it ain't very Christmassy of me to keep layin' into Hannibal like that. It's possible I could let up a tiny bit and give him a chance. Out of my own elaborately impressive fucking charity, know what I mean? And I would get so many brownie points with my girl…Hmmm…But if he hurts Will again, I'm gonna stake him through the heart with some holly faster than you can say…'woof, woof.'

"Woof, woof!" Polonius exclaimed, rolling over and getting on his feet with an indignant expression.

"I can't help but think you're tryin' to tell me somethin." Charlie stood, perched her hands on her hips and mused, "But what? It's like you're warnin' me."

She got a weird, creepy sort of feeling and knew she'd only sit there distracted and paranoid if she ignored it. "Guess I'll go check on your old man," she declared reluctantly. "You wanna come with? Moral support and all that?"

Polonius settled back down on the couch and closed his eyes, ready for a nap.

"You're a petty bitch," Charlie accused. "We'll talk about friends and how they do each other favors later, buddy."

She made her way from the coldly severe 'lounging area,' where at least she felt mostly in the world of the living, down the long, winding hall to Robertus' room, muttering, "like somethin' out of goddamn Wuthering Heights, for the love of Kris Kringle how long am I gonna be stuck here? Dammit…"

The side of the house where Robertus dwelled was different from the more lived-in and calmer wing where Murasaki and Chiyoh had their rooms. Charlie felt she ought to have a candelabra in one hand and be wearing a Jane Eyre-style long white nightgown instead of Christmas pajamas with a matching hoodie bearing "reindeer ears" on top.

Charlie let herself into Robertus' room and slipped through imposing, gothic shadows until the huge, woeful four-poster bed came into view. The skinny and frail Robertus seemed to be swallowed up by the grandness of the bed and its heavy, dark red blankets.

"You okay, Uncle Robertus?" She asked softly.

"Oh, it's you, Charlene." Robertus coughed weakly. "Good. Almost everyone else is such a dreadful – bother – when one is ill. They all think I'm going to –" he lost his breath and struggled to get it back.

"Hey, hey, now," Charlie soothed, really not wanting him to die on her watch. She gestured to the oxygen machine nearby but he refused it, pointing for her to sit down.

"They think I'm going to expire here in this bed any second now, but I have fight in me yet. Keep me company a while, girl. Tell me, how is my family?"

"Oh, fine, fine," Charlie said vaguely, sitting down and using most of her energy to mask how much she hated being in his presence.

He was gross enough under normal circumstances, but this close up when he was the really scary kinda sick was another story. She felt so uncomfortable that it was all she could do not to turn and go running away to hide.

"I mean," she added with a forced laugh, trying to lighten things up, "That dog of yours has got an attitude and a half, huh?"

Robertus coughed and ignored this question. "How is Hannibal? That ne'er-do-well nephew of mine. He has been ignoring me – only came back for–" He gulped down air with difficulty. "Money. He won't get a dime from me, I'll have you know."

*I mean, I do not fuckin' care, but okay.*

“Right.” She nodded slowly. “Well, I guess he seems to be doin’ pretty good. He rekindled the flame with my friend Will. Dunno if you knew they used to date many years ago, but uh–”

Robertus tried to sit up, a panicked look making his face look paler and more gaunt, so he appeared absolutely dead for a few moments. Charlie yelped and cringed back in her chair, clinging to the bottom of it.

“Fu– I mean, *gosh!* You okay, sir?”

“No!” Robertus coughed and Charlie got him to drink some water this time.

“What do you mean, Will. *Will Graham,* that indecent little pauper he took up with all those summers ago? That trash? He intends to sully – cough! – the family name and dignity – with – with –”

“Um, listen, no offense, just to look at it plainly and be fair, I’m no richer or nobler in origin than Will is. But you let me into the family with no problem. You’ve been warm and encouraging to me. How come?”

Robertus’ features contorted into an ugly rage, his eyes flashing with it. “Because I love Chiyoh, and because I hate Hannibal. I despise that – *cough!* – disobedient waste of space. My brother died and that hideous, idiotic and weak whelp survived to make my life hell. I did everything I could to block his happiness – and I’m – not done, no matter what the doctors – *cough* –” he gasped, “Say. I’ll split them up again if it’s my last act, and make sure it’s permanent this time.”

“I’m sorry, *what*, sir?” Charlie put a hand on her heart as it sped up with a crazy sort of fearful premonition. She had the worst feeling he was about to reveal some dreadful thing he had done in the past and it involved her best friend.

*Will...*

“I knew Hannibal was going to take that backwoods *trash* to Baltimore with him, eventually, or that the boy would trick him into throwing his life away on a – *cough, cough* – pathetic redneck life. Couldn’t allow either one.”

“You couldn’t *allow* it?” Charlie wanted to know what happened, so she forced her voice to remain even. “It sounds like you couldn’t allow Hannibal to be happy.”

“He doesn’t know how to be happy, except by humiliating the family, forsaking his birthright, sinking further into – *cough, cough* – mediocrity. Will Graham represents everything wrong with my nephew. Glad I succeeded, but – can’t believe Hannibal is stupid enough to go near that man again. For that matter?” Robertus’ wan autumn-brown eyes widened. “I can’t believe Graham let Hannibal near him at all. After what I did to make sure…”

“Oh, right, make sure,” Charlie repeated. He was like every movie villain, desperate to have his monologues heard. She knew how to keep him talking.

“Yes. I’ll tell you, Charlene, you’ll understand, even if no one else would. You hate my nephew, too. There’s a table next to my bed, and in the top drawer, you’ll find a small – cough – key which opens the bottom one.”

Charlie moved so quickly she almost fumbled and dropped the key. When she had the bottom drawer open, she saw it was a very deep one, and absolutely chock full of letters. From top to bottom; she could barely even wrench it open when it was unlocked.

“What in the world,” she breathed in surprise. Horror struck her when she picked one up to examine it.

The envelope was old. It was postmarked in 1993. And the return address was Will’s apartment from back then, the one he used to share with Grady. The letter was addressed to Hannibal Lecter in Baltimore. She stared down at the faded paper, once white and now yellowed. In a numb sort of panic, she began digging through the drawer, excavating countless letters from all different years – every year, up till about 2010.

Will must have written so many letters in the first couple of years alone; there were many more from ‘93 to 94 than any other year. After that, they appeared to slowly reduce year by year until Will must have given up on hearing back – again.

How many times had Will told himself Hannibal would never write back, only to find himself in a moment of nostalgic, romantic desperation, sending another? Chiyoh always had Hannibal’s correct address in Baltimore. The various envelopes were all accurately addressed for the places he lived in those years.

“Good thing the stupid boy finally stopped writing, wasting all that paper,” Robertus croaked in amusement. “I was running out of room in my drawer.”

Charlie clutched one of the letters to her heart and tried to breathe. “I understand that it would be possible for someone as rich as you to bribe the small, local post office to hold these letters rather than sending them on to Maryland. Even to catch any letters that your nephew sent to Will before they could reach him. But how did you stop them from connecting on the phone?”

Robertus cackled and almost choked, he coughed so hard. After he recovered himself, he bragged, “I had to work on that one, it wasn’t easy at first. But I got to Hannibal’s roommates, made sure they never let him answer the phone, and he’s not a phone person anyway. He must have assumed if someone called for him, the roommates would tell him. But they never did because I paid them so well. In my favor, I had how hard he was working at the time, those long shifts. He was seldom home when the phone rang. After a while, not even that long, they stopped themselves from connecting. Both convinced that the other was ignoring and rejecting them. I won.”

Charlie had never felt quite so much like suffocating someone with a pillow. She actually thought about it for about a minute of shocked, silent grief and anger. All her protectiveness of Will, and she had never suspected the uncle of tampering with their communication in this way. Charlie could only begin to condone her own blindness with the knowledge that no one

sane would ever contrive such a horrible scheme, much less carry it through. How or why would anyone think even this mean old patriarch was *that* awful and destructive?

“Twenty years.” Tears trickled down her cheeks. She could not actually attack Chiyoh’s elderly, terminally ill relative, and after all, he wasn’t long for the world. There was no real point. He’d never repent or regret his actions. He was proud of himself. “They could have been together for twenty years. We all thought Hannibal never wrote back, but he never got a single letter.”

“Twenty years.” Robertus laughed, a broken, hollow noise, inhuman. And, happy to have shown off, not understanding the difference between disliking someone and ruining their life out of pure, petty malice, he closed his eyes, relaxing in his lavish bedding.

The dark room held him in his sad, big bed, and maybe he had even just fucking died, maybe he was still holding on by a thread, Charlie didn’t care at that moment. Since he had gone back to sleep, she grabbed an empty suitcase she found in his closet and started packing it full of the letters. Then, with a determined look and wildness in her insistent jerking movements, she grabbed the handle and lugged it outside to her car.

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Charlie got to Will’s house, searching for either him or Hannibal, probably looking a bit insane – still wearing her reindeer pajamas, and dragging a suitcase on wheels behind her.

“Oh hey, what’s up – you alright?” Rhett wandered out onto the front porch. He had a candy cane sticking out of his mouth and a Nintendo Switch in one hand.

The hot weather meant he was much more appropriately dressed in shorts and a t-shirt; Charlie was melting now that she was out of the creepy-cold manor house and out in the real world. Didn’t matter.

Breathing hard, she asked, “Rhett, where’s your daddy?”

His brows shot up. Although he never called Will his father, he did not question her, probably because of her crazed expression, if not the antlers atop her head. It was all concerning, surely, even to a fourteen year old.

“Um, Will went for a walk, I think. Hey, Dr. Lecter?” Rhett called behind him into the house.

“Hannibal,” Charlie murmured, “He’s here?”

Rhett nodded, then with a shrug curled up on the front porch swing to play his game.

Hannibal appeared with an apron on and a primly disapproving expression upon seeing her. With a condescending, small smirk he said, “I love the antlers.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, jesus,” Charlie muttered. She’d forgotten about the hood even as it helped to smother her. Now, she yanked it down, looking only about twenty percent less insane. “Hannibal, I’m so sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry.”

“Is Will alright?” he asked hurriedly, suddenly worried.

“He’s fine, he’s fine. I found somethin’ out and y’all need to know this. Breaks my heart, I can’t imagine how you both will feel. Take a look.”

They left Rhett outside with his headphones and went into Will’s cozy living room. Hannibal unzipped the suitcase and looked through the deep pile of mail. As it all came crashing down on him, he squeezed his eyes shut and sat back. Gulping for air, he said, “My uncle.”

“Yeah, he paid off the postmaster, he paid your damn roommates not to tell you when Will called.”

Hannibal put his head in his hands. “I was on rounds, constantly, I was hardly ever in my apartment, not for at least three years. I did pick up my mail, of course…”

“Not a single one of these went through to you,” she said gravely. “You know what he thought. You gotta tell him.”

He nodded, ran a hand over his face, and undid his apron strings. “I’ll go and find him.”

“Hannibal, I’m sorry I believed the worst about you…”

“You had no way of knowing,” he said dismissively, “And neither did Will.”

***

**Now. Will and Hannibal.**

A walk to get some fresh air was out of the question, since it was hotter than a tropical rainforest. But Will, in his red gym shorts and grey t-shirt with a cartoon Santa on it, was strolling along lost in thought. He had really just wanted a good long think, to figure out how to accept that something else must have happened to make Hannibal not write back. But it was so hard to convert the belief he’d suffered under for all these years, even when he wanted to trust Hannibal again more than anything.

Frustrated, trying to make his heart hear common sense, he was rounding the corner between the next street over and his own, when Hannibal came running towards him.

Will had not really ever seen Hannibal run, since the man was normally so damn elegant and composed. As usual, the doctor looked debonair, despite the casual mood of the day, even in an outfit so understated by his standards: a pair of soft gray lounge pants, a red v-neck t-shirt and what seemed to be Will’s pair of Converse.

That is, he looked as smooth as a man could, considering that the shoes were barely tied and the top tongue was folded over, since Hannibal’s feet were a bit bigger than Will’s. What could make Hannibal feel he needed to hurry so much that he didn’t even put his own shoes on, but just grabbed any pair he could find and cram on?

The only time Will had seen Hannibal lose his self-control had always been in the throes of their passion, one form of it or another. This was something else.

“The twins okay?” Will blurted.

Hannibal got to him and nodded. “They’re fine. Charlie was at the Chateau. My uncle told her something, Will.”

He was holding a letter, Will could see that now. A stab of weird, scary familiarity about the old envelope and postmark, his handwriting, all of it, struck him hard and fast. “Where did you get that?”

It was still unopened. Will took it in shaking hands and examined it.

“My uncle has all of the letters in a drawer, in his room,” Hannibal hastened to reveal. “He used every wicked, conniving trick in the world to make sure I never received these, never heard from you or knew you still cared. And I fell for it, like the insecure fool that I was, so easily convinced you had let me go. I should have known, Will.”

“I should have known you’d never ignore me like that. Oh, my God, Hannibal, I never did. I really fell for it just the same as you, never questioned the idea that you were too good for me and figured that out once you were back in your own world, where you belonged.”

“No, Will, you’re my world. I should have let you know that.” Hannibal pulled Will close and hugged him.

Will held onto him like a life raft and trembled. “We have to let all that go. Keep the good parts, the precious things that we shared. We have them back. Let’s forget about the bullshit bad times and all our mistakes.”

Tearfully, he looked at Hannibal with more love than the older man would ever have believed could be pointed in his direction. “It’s Christmas.”

“Yes.” Hannibal nodded. “How strange, that now it means not only something, but so much.”

“Hey, y’all,” said P.J., walking down the sidewalk with her doll in a stroller. “You okay? Look like you got struck by lightnin’ or– wait a minute.”

She looked at her doll’s blank but cheerful smile, then back over at Hannibal and Will. “Were you gonna…kiss? Are those tears in your eyes? Is it the Christmas magic bringing your true love back at last?”

Will laughed and cried at the same time. “I guess it is, Pauline Junior. And I should have known you were right all along.”

“Well, I mean, yeah,” P.J. answered with a confident smile. “But that’s okay! I’m always right, and Mama said I get it from her. She told me people aren’t always gonna wanna listen to me. Anyway, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! True love conquers all – just wait till I tell Wyatt, he’s gonna eat his words…”

Will gave her a hug and said gently, “Thank you, P.J.”

“For meddlin’ and fortune-tellin?”

“Yes, honey. Now, I will see you and your brother and sister in a little while. Is your Mama gettin’ ready for the usual trouble?”

“You know it, Uncle Will. Daddy’s already got the turkey frier goin’ in the yard. Mama’s fit to be tied, says he’s gonna melt himself in this bleeping heat and serves him right.”

“Every year, Grady insists on frying a turkey for Christmas Eve dinner,” Will explained to Hannibal. “It has…never gone well. Though thankfully no one has been injured, except the culinary world in general and a whole lot of turkeys.”

“We wouldn’t miss the dinner for the world,” Hannibal smiled. “And your mother is welcome to call or text if we can bring over any food or drink to offset the unfortunate turkey.”

“I sure will,” she said eagerly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get Greta here back home.” pointing to her doll, she explained, “Magnolia and her baby are waiting on us for a playdate.”

“Enjoy,” Will grinned.

“See you later on,” Hannibal put in as the girl walked back towards her house.

He put an arm around Will, and there they were. It was twenty years coming, but it felt sudden. As unexpected as it was profoundly sweet. They were a couple, standing in their neighborhood on Christmas Eve, and they were never going to lose each other again.

“Can I show you something?” Will asked softly.

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At home, Will brought Hannibal into his room, saying a quick hi to Savannah Jean on the way. She was wrapping gifts at the dining room table with a determined expression, which made the pile of crumpled wrapping paper and ribbons from previous, botched attempts downright respectable.

Closing the door behind them, Will took a deep breath and went to the closet. Not the one where his clothes were, but the extra one that was a quirky feature of this house. It was mostly just full of boxes, neatly stacked.

“I stopped sending the letters,” Will explained, taking the lid off one of the boxes and revealing a whole row of envelopes addressed to Hannibal. “But I kept writing them to you. Sometimes every day. I’d tell you what was goin’ on in my life. And I would rail against you and say how mad I was, and other times I’d write how I still loved you and missed you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?” Hannibal gasped.

“I was embarrassed. I thought I was…all alone with these feelings.”

“Never.” Hannibal clasped Will’s face and kissed his lips fervently. “Oh, Will, never, ever. I thought about you with every breath, every heartbeat.”

“Same,” Will said, smirking through another haze of tears. “Anyway, they’re your letters, you can read them. Or I’ll read you one every day or somethin’.”

“I’d be honored.” Hannibal could only think of one thing that seemed right to do, so he sat on the bed and put his arms out.

Will laughed and climbed onto his lap. “Once a Santa, always a Santa, huh?”

“It’s not a job you simply leave once the red hat’s hung up, you know.”

Hannibal just held him close and they chatted about this and that for a while. Peaceful and cozy.

“Retrospectively, it’s rather amusing to recall Charlie’s attire when she brought the letters over earlier,” he noted.

Will chuckled. “Chiyoh has a weakness for giving her the funniest Christmas pajamas, every year.”

“There were antlers,” Hannibal explained, “With little twinkle lights on them.”

A text came through and Will grabbed his phone, causing him and Hannibal to laugh again at a photo that Charlie had just texted him.

“*If y’all are reconciled by now, are you in the market for a dog, by any chance?*”

The picture showed Charlie, still in her ridiculous pj’s and holding an even more ridiculous, portly dog with the grumpiest expression ever.

“Oh, no,” Hannibal said once he got over the amusement of the photo and saw the words. “Absolutely not.”

“Aw, Hannibal, look at that little face.”

Hannibal gave Will an exasperated look. “It’s not even that little.”

Will ignored this. “So sweet. He couldn’t help bein’ badly raised and taught, we can turn it around. What a cute little guy. *Haaaannnibal*….”

The older man glanced down at Polonius with a grimace, but there was no saying no to Will’s pleading expression.

“Well. I know you always wanted a dog, darling, and…if there is anyone in the world who could actually teach Polonius manners, I’m sure it’s you.”

“Yes!” Will said, as if he was a kid again. “The twins’ll be thrilled. We can get him after the holidays, I guess. Have to check with Charlie, and…what?”

Will’s eyes widened at Hannibal, who was staring at him in a thrall of disbelief.

“Us. Adopting a wretched disaster of a dog. Making a life. That’s all.” He smiled and kissed Will, then lowered him to the bed, where they curled up together.

“Imagine that. And at first, this place wasn’t even on your travel itinerary, Doctor.” Will gave him a playful grin. “This is quite the detour you’ve made.”

“A permanent detour,” Hannibal confirmed blissfully. “I think we’ve had enough years of being serious adults. Let’s go back to the past together. I believe our future is waiting for us there.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.” Will finally felt that his soul was free from all the sadness and confusion he had been bogged down by. The ache between them had healed into a warm certainty, something to believe in and never let go. “I love you. And I want you to know that even if we never found out about what your Uncle did to keep us apart, there’s no way I’d have let you go again. Any more than you could have left me.”

“Are you saying that you think you’ll keep me?” Hannibal blushed, delighted.

“I *know* I will, seein’ as you couldn’t get away from these arms if you tried.” Will demonstrated with a tight embrace as his lips met Hannibal’s with happy fervor.

Hannibal was about to peel Will’s cute little t-shirt off and have his wicked way (again), when the twins started calling them from downstairs. And it was perfectly fine to be interrupted, knowing they had all the time in the world. How comfortable this life seemed, all of a sudden!

Will laugh-groaned and went to the door, opening it a little to ask the kids what was up.

“Oh, hey, Dad,” Rhett said lightly. “Do you think we could make cookies later, to bring over to Uncle Grady’s?”

“I cleaned the Christmas cookie cutters, and we still have three cans of frosting, plus more dough,” Savannah Jean put in.

Will gave them a goofy grin for several long moments, until the twins started asking what he was waiting for. He laughed, wiping a tear away. “Of course we can make some cookies. Why don’t you get the ingredients ready? We can get started right away, if you want.”

The kids cheered with delight, and Will couldn’t help noticing that Rhett had called him Dad for the very first time, without attaching any special meaning to it. He tossed the word off to Will as if it was just a boring, expected aspect of who they were to each other, and that made it much more special than any big, serious discussion about it would have been.

“You up for yet more baking, Dr. Lecter?” Will asked, reaching for Hannibal’s hand and pulling him up from the bed. “We couldn’t possibly do it without you.”

They stood face to face and heart to heart, grinning at each other like the lovestruck, young fools they had been so many years ago. And now, they were more in love than ever.

Hannibal nodded eagerly. He could not help but answer in reference to a season he had started the month despising, and now treasured. Christmas had brought him to Will, to all of the strange, wild emotions and misadventures that had happened since. And he planned to treasure every moment of this splendid holiday with his beloved and their family.

“Of course I am, my perfect boy.” Hannibal grinned as his words still had the same effect as ever, making Will blush beautifully. “After all, tis the season.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to those who have supported and encouraged this story! ❤️🌹

End Notes

**Fic playlist:** https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1PxX7qS7Mne1uNHHnamKZi?si=13e0ca6b412e4654

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